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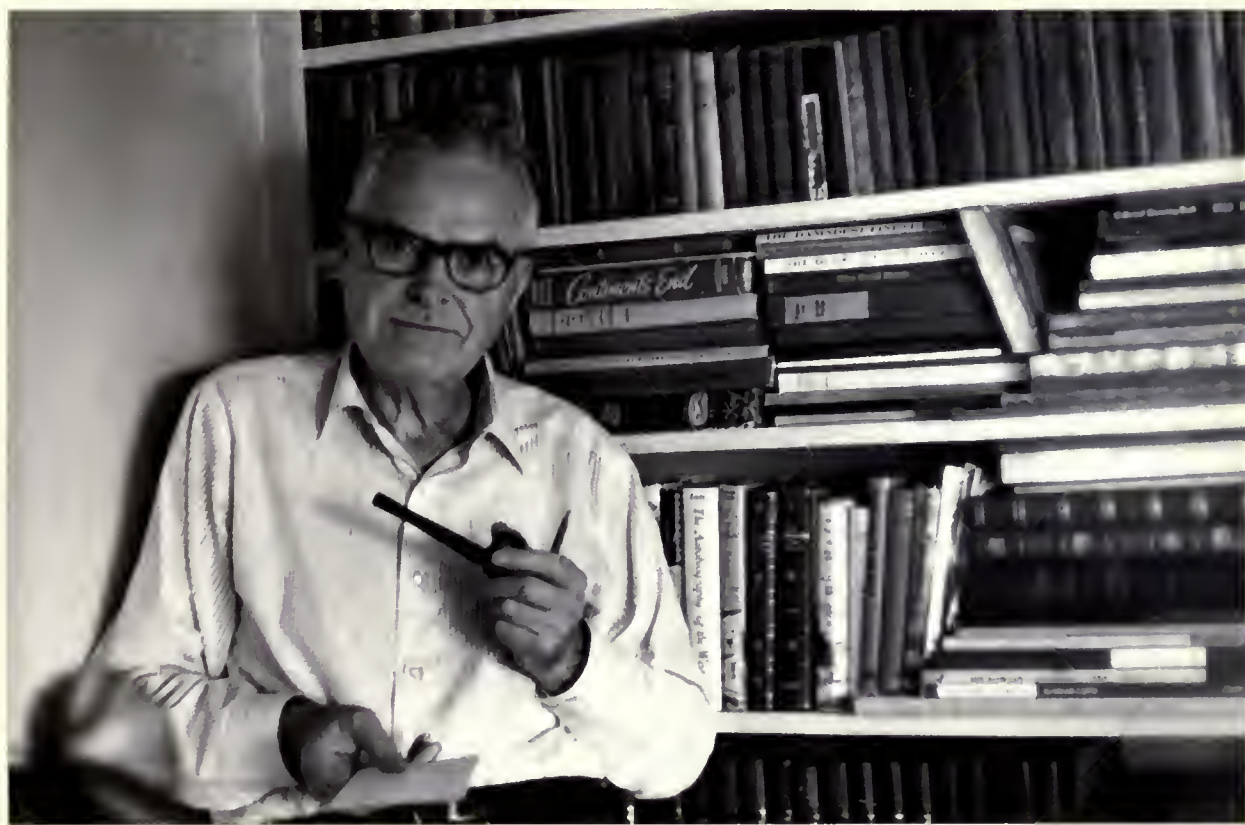
Oscar Lewis

LITERARY SAN FRANCISCO

An Interview Conducted by
Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun

Berkeley
1965

Oscar Lewis at home, at 2740 Union Street, June 30, 1965



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OSCAR LEWIS
1955 photo of S.F. native

Oscar Lewis, 99, Author and Historian Of S.F. and the West

By Harre W. Demoro
Chronicle Staff Writer

Author and historian Oscar Lewis, the last of the old San Francisco bohemians who wrote extensively about the history of San Francisco and the West, is dead at age 99.

Mr. Lewis died Saturday at his home on Union Street in San Francisco. The San Francisco native had been ill for about two years.

"He lived by the pen. We will not see his likes again," said historian Kevin Starr, a longtime friend.

"Oscar Lewis held down the genteel wing of San Francisco's prewar bohemian tradition with good tailoring, bow ties and manhattans before lunch," said Starr, former city librarian of San Francisco and a professor of urban history at the University of Southern California.

Mr. Lewis emerged as an author and historian in the 1930s, when Californians began examining their pioneer past and celebrating their heritage. His books were among the first to define the West in the context of its history.

Mr. Lewis was courted by Eastern publishers, especially Alfred Knopf. Knopf saw the West not as a province of the East — which was the literary fashion of the time — but as a region important in its own right that was enriched by many cultures.

"The Big Four," Mr. Lewis' best-known book, which was published in 1938, told how four robber barons built the first transcontinental railroad. It is still in print.

Mr. Lewis' works included: "The Silver Kings," "Fabulous San Simeon," "Sutter's Fort: Gateway to the Gold Fields," "Sea Routes to the Gold Fields," "Bay Window Bohemia," "Sage Brush Casinos," "High Sierra Country," "The Town That Died Laughing," "A History of San Francisco" and "Frank Norris and the Wave."

Mr. Lewis grew up in Sebastopol. He gained an appreciation of California by accompanying his mother, a music teacher, during her travels around the state to see her pupils.

Unlike most professional historians today, Mr. Lewis did not have a college degree and did not supplement his income by teaching. For most of his career, he earned his living solely by writing.

After graduating from Berkeley High School, Mr. Lewis entered the University of California at Berkeley but stayed for only about a year and quit in 1912 to write. During World War I, he served in an ambulance squad sponsored by the university.

In 1918, he rented an office in Berkeley. To support himself, he took a part-time job as secretary of the Book Club of California.

Mr. Lewis was a member of the Bohemian Club and the Westerners. He served on the San Francisco Art Commission from 1944 to 1960.

His only immediate survivor is a stepson, Addison Mooney of San Francisco.

At his request, there will be no service. His ashes will be placed in a family plot in a private cemetery in Sebastopol.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by an agreement between the Regents of the University of California and Oscar Lewis, dated 1 September 1965. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley.

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Lewis has long been one of Northern California's most productive authors, nationally esteemed for his books on Western history and his novels in Western settings. His best known book, The Big Four, an iconoclastic study of the builders of the Central Pacific Railroad, was published by Knopf in 1938. But his career as a writer for national publication had begun in 1912, before he was twenty, when he rented an office room in Berkeley and applied himself to his typewriter with the workmanlike self-discipline that has characterized his approach to authorship.

Born in 1893 in San Francisco, Mr. Lewis has spent most of his life in the Bay Area. In this interview, he recalls his youth in Sonoma County and Berkeley; his choice of an author's career instead of a college education; his experience in World War I; his stories and articles for The Smart Set and other well known magazines of the 1920's; his travels in Europe and North Africa; his years as secretary of the Book Club of California; the writers, bibliophiles, fine printers and artists he has known; and the circumstances of many of the books to which he has devoted his major attention

in the past twenty-five years.

A quiet, unassuming gentleman with a great store of humor, Mr. Lewis met the first suggestion of this interview with mild surprise that anyone should be interested in his recollections. His reaction was not unanticipated, for the interviewers had read a letter in the Gertrude Atherton collection in The Bancroft Library which he had written in 1945. Mrs. Atherton had asked Mr. Lewis to supply information about himself to be used in her book, My San Francisco. He replied:

Dear Mrs. Atherton:

Here are some notes on the life and works of Oscar Lewis. Maybe you will find them interesting but I doubt it. Most writers, I've discovered, are always having important or exciting or amusing things happen to them. I'm an exception. I've known writers who can go down to the corner to buy a bottle of milk and get involved in a hair-raising adventure; I could spend ten years in Central Africa and come out with a story about as wildly exciting as a trolley ride to the beach. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is with me. Anyhow, here are some random notes.

His notes for Mrs. Atherton were carefully prepared and apparently precisely what was wanted, for they are closely followed in the book. Similarly, having consented to be interviewed by the Regional Oral History Office, he

carefully organized his recollections and presented a thoughtful and interesting account of his life, work, associates, and views on writing.

The interview took place in the living room of the apartment on Union Street near the Presidio in San Francisco where Mr. Lewis lives and works. It was in four parts, on the afternoons of June 22, June 28, June 30, and July 6, 1965.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons prominent in recent California history. The Office is under the direction of Mrs. Willa Baum, and under the administrative supervision of Professor A. Hunter Dupree, Director of The Bancroft Library. Past interviews by the Office which may supplement the material covered in this interview have been done with Elsie Whitaker Martinez, Kathleen Norris, Herbert Coggins, and Edward deWitt Taylor and others are underway in the fields of literature, publishing, and printing.

Ruth Teiser
Catherine Harroun
Interviewers

15 December 1965

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California

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FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD

Interv: Could we begin by talking about your family?

Lewis: Well, I will start with my father because I know much less about his ancestry; he died when I was two years old so all I would know about him is what my mother told me about him. His name being Lewis--his full name was William F. Lewis--it is almost certain that his family came from Wales because Lewis in Wales is almost like Smith and Jones in the United States. My father was born in New Jersey, the town of Montclair, but the family must have moved to St. Louis because he came to California from St. Louis. He came out because the firm he was working for had the contract to put the windows in the old Palace Hotel which was being built in the early '70's. I never knew if his firm put the glass in, or the cases, or what, but it's not very important. Anyway, when that job was finished he became a builder, a speculative builder. He'd buy up half a block or a block of land and divide it into twenty-five foot lots

Lewis: and build these Victorian residences, always bay windows in front. We all know what they looked like.

Interv: Do you know of any he built?

Lewis: We used to have a stack of pictures of rows of houses that he had done but they've all disappeared except two or three. The location is not given so they could be almost anywhere. He had an office down at 18 Post Street, which in those days was on the ground floor of the old Lick House; now the Crocker-Citizens Bank is there, almost right across from the Mechanics Library.

What he used to do was build these houses, sell them for a small down payment, just like they sell tract houses now, and then he'd take the contracts to the bank and use them as security for loans with which to buy another piece of land and put up more houses. He did that for about ten years, and prospered until the early '90's. Shortly before that he and two other builders who were doing the same thing went in together and helped finance a lumber operation up in Mendocino County. I don't remember the names of the other builders. They bought timber land and put up a saw mill, the idea being that that way they could buy lumber at less than the market price. That went along fine until the early '90's and

Lewis: then there was a severe depression here in San Francisco. Building almost stopped and the market for lumber almost disappeared. This new saw mill was soon in financial difficulties.

My father's mother was still back in St. Louis and she became ill. He went back and stayed there about a month. She died and he settled the small estate. While he was gone the word got out that this lumber mill was about to fail. The other two co-signers of the note learned about it and were able to unload their own property--I don't know just what the legal phases of it were--but by the time my father got here--in the meantime the creditors of the lumber company had sued and the company had gone into bankruptcy, they had attached all my father's properties for this \$75,000 note. That just cleaned him out completely. All he had left was the furniture in our house, which was on Jackson and Baker Streets, just a few blocks from where I live now.

Interv: Wasn't that pretty far out at the time?

Lewis: It was. I remember my mother saying that she had to walk down four blocks of board sidewalk to get to the nearest streetcar, the California Street cablecar. That's where I was born, on May 5, 1893.

Lewis: But as I was saying, all he had left was the household furniture which was somehow exempt, and a ranch up in Sonoma County which he had taken as a down payment on one of his houses. It was heavily mortgaged, one hundred sixty acres, and his plan was to use it as a summer place, take us kids up there in the summer. But that is all he had, so he moved the family up there.

Interv: When was that?

Lewis: Probably 1894. I was very young, maybe three months old. I was in no position to know the year. Well, anyway, he started over again. He opened a little office in Santa Rosa, built two houses, was just getting started, and then he got cancer and died within two or three months and left my mother with five kids, five sons, and this mortgaged ranch and no support. But she was not much worried about that. She'd been a musician before she was married, and she started giving music lessons to the daughters of the other farmers. One of my earliest recollections is riding around in the buggy with her, and waiting outside while she went inside and gave an hour's lesson, for which she got fifty cents. And she later opened studios in Sebastopol, which was the nearest town, and another little town called Bloomfield. I don't know if you know of

Lewis: Bloomfield; it's now very much of a ghost town, there may be twenty people there. It was a little bigger in the '90's. Mother used to go once a week to Bloomfield and the pupils would come in to her.

Interv: Where was the ranch itself?

Lewis: It was about midway between the two. It was about three miles west of Sebastopol--very attractive country. It's the Gravenstein orchard country. It looks out over the Santa Rosa Valley--very attractive country. And it was an attractive ranch. The only trouble was that it didn't bring in anything. We raised food to feed us kids. We had a cow and a vegetable garden and fruit, etc.

Interv: Was it orchard land?

Lewis: There was an orchard and a berry patch. The rest was some pasture land and a couple of fields of hay. That went on from the time my father died, which was 1895, to 1905, ten years later. Then my mother remarried. She married a man named Lennon, Edward F. Lennon, whom she'd known here in San Francisco before she married.

Lennon had married and moved up to Tehama County to Red Bluff. He was a county official up there. He was a public administrator and coroner of Tehama County. His wife had died, and he and mother got into correspondence

Lewis: again and got married. And we moved up to Red Bluff.

I started school at a little country one-room schoolhouse near Sebastopol. Then I went to and finished grammar school in Red Bluff. But my mother's marriage didn't work out. And after two or three years they were divorced. She and us kids moved back to the Sebastopol ranch. This is all very complicated. I don't know whether you're interested or not.

Interv: Yes. It's very interesting, I should think.

Lewis: We went back to the Sebastopol ranch for a year. I had four brothers, Walter, Harry, William, and Harold; I was next to the youngest, between William and Harold. The two older brothers, Walter and Harry, are no longer living. My next older brother had gotten through high school in Red Bluff, and entered at Cal as a freshman. So my mother decided to move us kids to Berkeley and about 1910 we moved down to Berkeley.

I finished my high school there and mother continued living there until she died, in 1933. She survived her husband from '95--nearly forty years. That's about all I can say about my father's side of the family.

But I'd like to say something briefly about my mother's background because it's interesting and I know more about it.

Lewis: I've been thinking about it lately because a project has come up for which I may get a grant to do a biography of a prominent early American architect who lived in Philadelphia. His name was Thomas U. Walter. He was the federal architect from 1850 to 1865 in Washington. It was he who designed the Capitol as we know it today; that is, he designed the Senate and House wings and the dome. He also did a number of other government buildings in Washington--and a great many buildings in Philadelphia. He was my mother's grandfather.

I'll tell you briefly how I became interested in this projected biography of Walter. When I was working on a book about George Davidson I went back to Washington to do some research there because Davidson was for years with the Coast and Geodetic Survey. While I was back there I thought I would check on what my great-great grandfather had been doing in Washington. I found a lot of material, letters and such, in the Federal Architect's Office, in the National Archives, and in the Library of Congress. Somebody in the National Archives said I must go to Philadelphia and look up a man who was connected with an organization there--architectural historians or something of the sort--because he was an enthusiast of Walter's

Lewis: work and was trying to get a biography of him published. So I went to see this chap and we talked about the plan. Nothing developed at that time, but about six months ago I got a letter from him telling me that he had lined up what he thought was a surefire grant to finance research and publication of a biography. So I went back last fall. At the time it looked as though the plan was going through, but it now develops that a number of different organizations would have to okay the plan. The prospect of having to get twenty different groups to agree on the project has made me doubtful of the outcome. If it happens, fine, but I'm not counting on it.

Walter's son, my grandfather, came out here soon after the Civil War. He was in the Civil War. My mother was born in the little town of Whitestown, Indiana. Her father was an attorney there.

Interv: What was his first name?

Lewis: Horace. Soon after the war was over, he came out to California, in 1866 or '67. One of the men he had been with in the war was a man named Barnes, who became an attorney here in San Francisco, General W.H.L. Barnes. He wrote my grandfather and asked him to come out and join the law firm. So he came out. The first assignment he was given

Lewis: was to go down to Monterey and take depositions and interview people in preparation for one of the land grant cases. The courts were still full of land grant cases at that time. So my grandfather went down to Monterey and spent about a month and finally started back with his depositions and transcripts of interviews. He went down to the wharf. In those days most of the travel up and down the coast was by steamer; it was before the railroad reached Monterey. The boat sailed at midnight. After it was out about an hour, one of the deck hands came up to the bridge and said somebody was lying in the bow of the boat. It proved to be my grandfather. He had been hit over the head and supposedly thrown into the bay. But he had landed on the deck of this steamer. The boat turned around, but he was dead when they got back to the wharf. There was some investigation, but no arrests were made and nothing was ever done. His valise containing the material he collected had disappeared.

Interv: My word!

Lewis: So there's at least some violence and mystery in the family tree.

Interv: What land grant was this?

Lewis: Barnes was representing the holders of the original Mexican-Spanish grant. The land was occupied by a family that was then prominent on the Monterey Peninsula. I don't know whether I should mention names because it was circumstantial evidence.

My grandmother was one of those very impractical people, I remember her sitting in her rocking chair and ordering people to wait on her--she'd been doing it all her life. She was left alone with five children. My mother was the eldest. A friend of her father, a sea captain, offered my grandmother to support the family if my mother would marry him, although he was about twice her age. That was my mother's first marriage. My two older brothers, half-brothers really, were from this first marriage. They were divorced after five or six years. Several years later my mother married my father.

Interv: Your mother must have been a woman of courage.

Lewis: I told you what happened after my father died and left her with five children and no money. She wasn't fazed by any of that. I wanted to have some reference to both sides of the family.

Interv: What was her maiden name? And her first husband's name, just so we have the records all straight.

Lewis: Her maiden name was Anna Walter. Her first husband was Mark M. Robbins.

Interv: Were your parents great readers?

Lewis: I don't know enough about my father to know. My mother liked to read. But she was primarily a businesswoman. Even after she settled in Berkeley she did a lot of buying and selling of real estate. She didn't have much money, but if she could buy a piece of property she liked and pay as little as \$100 down, she never hesitated. She'd trust to luck that she could resell it and make a small profit. And she was getting along very well until once more, as had happened to my father in the early 1890's, the 1929 depression came along. During her last few years it was just nip and tuck.

Interv: What happened to your family in the 1923 fire in Berkeley?

Lewis: We were out in the Solano Avenue district of Berkeley, out of the burned area. I remember the fire quite well.

Interv: What high school did you go to in Berkeley?

Lewis: The regular Berkeley High School. Of course it was quite different from what it is today. It was on the same site, but I don't think there's one of the original buildings there now.

Interv: Did you like living in that much of a city after having

Interv: lived in the country and in Red Bluff?

Lewis: I didn't mind, except that Berkeley High School was quite a change--my first year of high school was in Sebastopol. They'd just opened a new school there, and I was in the first class. By the way, that school has since been demolished as obsolete and replaced by a new school, which makes me realize I'm not as young as I used to be. By the time I got to Berkeley, with all our moving around, I had lost a term here and there, and the consequence was that I was older than most of my classmates. I was nineteen when I got out of high school; that was in 1913. I didn't take any particular part in the school activities.

BEGINNING TO WRITE

Interv: When did you decide you wanted to be a writer?

Lewis: Perhaps it was because I had an English teacher at Berkeley High School who asked me to stay after class one day. She said she'd been watching the papers I had turned in. She said she thought I had a real talent for writing. Well you know what that could do to a high school kid. I took it seriously. I began trying to write short stories--adventure stories for boys. Somewhere I picked up a magazine, I think it was called The Writer's Magazine, that listed markets for literary material. There I read that one magazine--I remember it very well--called Forward needed stories. Forward was a weekly publication that was distributed in the Presbyterian Sunday schools. In those days papers of that sort were given to the children at all the Sunday schools. That group of papers published short stories--articles, serial stories--that sort of thing.

So I wrote a story in longhand and sent it to the Presbyterian Board of Publication in Philadelphia, I

Lewis: remember--and more or less forgot about it. Then a month or so later I got an envelope and a printed form saying, "We are accepting for Forward your story, and we enclose our check for \$12.00." Well when I saw the check I wondered how long that had been going on. (Laughter) You get paid for doing something you like to do. So naturally, I kept on. By the time I was out of high school I had sold three stories to boys' magazines. And I think the total I got for them was about \$35.00.

Interv: Do you remember what the other magazines were?

Lewis: I think I sold two to Forward and one to a magazine called The Boys' World. The Boys' World was an inter-denominational paper. It was distributed to all Sunday schools, not to any particular sect. The David C. Cook Company of Elgin, Illinois, which published it, were dealers in Sunday school supplies. During the next two years I wrote a lot for the Cook Company. Besides The Boys' World, which in those days had a very large circulation, the firm published another magazine called Young People's Weekly.

When I started writing boys' stories it was much easier than it would be for anyone starting now. In

Lewis: those days the kids did a lot more reading, apparently, than they do now. There was no radio or television then. In my day there were, besides the Sunday school papers, five or six excellent young people's magazines. The Youth's Companion, for instance, and Saint Nicholas, and The American Boy. When I was writing for The American Boy the editor was Clarence Buddington Kelland.

Interv: He was?

Lewis: Yes, you know he became a writer of serials for the Saturday Evening Post. He died just recently. He must have been quite an old man.

Another fine magazine was the Boy Scouts' official magazine, called Boys' Life. I had an interesting thing happen just recently in connection with Boys' Life. I was looking through a box of old magazine writings, mostly boys' magazines; and I came upon this copy of Boys' Life with a story of mine in it, and happened to notice the name of the man who had illustrated it. I'm sure that when I first saw it the name meant nothing to me; he was a beginner, just as I was. But when I looked at it a year or so ago, I found that the artist was Norman Rockwell. It was probably one of the very first things he did.

Interv: How old were you when you sold your first story?

Lewis: I was probably about 18.

Interv: Did you know any other writers?

Lewis: No I didn't.

I stayed out of school until the following summer, and then I went to summer school at Cal because I needed to make up some credits to get in as a freshman. Then in the fall of 1914, I enrolled as a special student--I was still on probation because I didn't have all my credits--and I began taking freshman English. Everybody had to take the same English course as a freshman, and I believe we began by reading The Lady of the Lake. And here I was, a published author, having to study The Lady of the Lake. Of course I felt myself above all that. What I wanted to do was to take some upper division English literature courses, especially one on creative writing which was being given by Ben Lehman. Lehman later was head of the English department. B.H. Lehman, do you remember him?

Interv: Why, yes! I didn't realize that he went back that far.

Lewis: Yes, he was there in 1914. Well, I screwed up my courage and went to see Lehman and told him what I was doing. I told him I wanted to take one of his courses and one other--I think it was a course given by Charles Mills Gayley, though I might be mistaken about that. I told Lehman

Lewis: about what I had in mind and he said, "Yes, I'll give you permission." I made it clear that I didn't plan to stay the full four years and work for a degree. Then he said, "I think you'll learn more about writing by going on and doing what you're doing, than by taking our English courses here." Which was probably not very diplomatic on his part. But I took his advice and quit, and Lehman later became a good friend of mine. He sometimes used to read my manuscripts and criticize them. I still see him occasionally; he lives down at Los Gatos now and he has long since retired.

Interv: Yes. Wasn't that amazing of anyone in professional education?

Lewis: Well, I don't think he took such matters over-seriously. If he wanted to tell some people he thought they could learn better by themselves, he'd go ahead and tell them.

Interv: So you didn't enroll again?

Lewis: No, I didn't. I think I went for maybe three weeks or so.

Interv: You had been going the summer before though?

Lewis: Yes, I'd gone to summer school and taken a couple of courses.

Interv: Incidentally, you mentioned your high school teacher; do you remember her name?

Lewis: I think her name was Gertrude Henderson. I talked recently with a classmate of mine, Allan Sproul, you know, Bob Sproul's younger brother. He was in my class at Berkeley High School. We hadn't met for at least forty years, and then we met a year or two ago when we were both serving on a committee at the California Historical Society.

Interv: You still remember all of your high school class? I suppose it was a small class?

Lewis: I remember some of them. I don't think it was very big. There might have been fifty students. I'd probably remember them if I saw them. One or two were in my outfit in World War I, so, of course I remember them quite well.

Interv: Was Berkeley a lively place for a young man starting out on a writing career? Was it a particularly good place?

Lewis: Well, it was a good place in that with the university there were good library facilities. But in my beginning years I didn't make any particular use of the university library. I used it occasionally, particularly in doing non-fiction, you know, I'd go there to look up the backgrounds. For that purpose it was much better than the Berkeley library, which was on the same site as the present library, but much smaller.

Interv: Did your mother encourage your writing?

Lewis: Yes, she was interested in it, and rather amused by it. Of course, I lived with her those first years when I was breaking into the trade. I remember that when I decided to go seriously into the business, I rented an office on Shattuck Avenue in an office building. I paid ten dollars per month, and moved in a kitchen table, and chair, and a typewriter. I kept regular hours.

Interv: My word, that showed a good deal of business ability.

Lewis: I was trying to make a living at it.

Interv: And you did.

Lewis: Yes, I certainly didn't make any large income, but it was enough and I got by. And I assembled enough to--this was later, after World War I--

Interv: Someone said that you had been a journalist at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Is that correct?

Lewis: I'll tell you about that. At the time of the Fair, I was writing not only fiction, but anything I thought I could sell. I went over to see the head of the Fair's publicity department, which was located in the Press Building on the grounds. The Press Building, I think, was just down the hill from here, near the Scott Street entrance. The press department pool wouldn't give me a

Lewis: job or salary, but when I told them I wanted to freelance, to write articles about the Exposition and sell them on my own, they were of course perfectly willing to cooperate. I was given a pass to the Exposition, which I was very proud of. And at the Press Building I always had the use of a typewriter. Also they would supply me with whatever pictures I needed. Mostly if you wanted to sell an article you had to illustrate it. Of course I kept whatever I got from the sale of my stuff. The publicity department helped me to the extent of supplying illustrations and data and things like that. What I did mostly was I would write articles on the various states. Quite a number of states had their own buildings--and I'd write an article on the building and the exhibits and send it to one of the leading newspapers in that state. Often they'd return it, saying that they could get this press material free so why should they pay for mine? But, once in a while one of the newspapers would buy an article, and I would get maybe \$25.00 for it.

Interv: Twenty-five dollars!

Lewis: Yes, that was about the extent of it. Of course, in those days, most of the metropolitan newspapers had

Lewis: their own Sunday supplements. It wasn't like today when, you know, they use so much syndicated material. That was another outlet for beginning writers that no longer exists today.

Interv: Yes, I suppose that's true.

Was the Fair a wonderful experience for you, the Fair itself?

Lewis: I remember I enjoyed it. I didn't have to pay to get in. So I used to go quite often. (Laughter)

Interv: Had you been in San Francisco much before that?

Lewis: No, not particularly. I was living in Berkeley. I don't suppose I came over any more than most Berkeley people did.

Interv: Did you enjoy being in the city at the time of the Fair? Or did you just come directly back and forth?

Lewis: I don't remember. I used to wander around the city quite a lot, often looking for material. I remember I once wrote an article on Golden Gate Park for a Sunday newspaper back in the mid-west that used to take occasional articles.

Interv: We came across an article on Chinatown in the Overland. I guess that was a little later. That was in a 1917 Overland Monthly.

Lewis: Probably, yes. That was just the end of the period

Lewis: before World War I.

Interv: When you were being a journalist at the Fair, did you meet other professional journalists there?

Lewis: I met some of them on the publicity staff. I think there was a fellow named Frank Morton Todd, who later wrote a history of the Fair. I believe he was one of that group. I don't remember any of the others.

Interv: No one particularly who was influential.

Lewis: Not particularly, at that time. There was a chap named John Barry, but that was after World War I. He had a column on the Bulletin for a long time. John D. Barry. He lived in Sausalito.

In the army, in World War I, there were a couple of fellows in my unit who later became newspaper people. Marsh Maslin, whom you probably remember.

Interv: Oh, yes.

Lewis: And Johnny Bruce who was city editor of the Chronicle, I think, and later of the Call-Bulletin.

Interv: Yes. Those really were then your first associations with other people that were doing about the same thing that you were doing.

Lewis: I suppose, to an extent, but neither of them was doing

Lewis: free lance writing--the kind of stuff that I was doing.
They were sensible enough to get a job where they
could be sure of a regular Saturday night check. (Laughter)

WORLD WAR I SERVICE

Interv: How did you happen to decide to break into your career and go off with the army?

Lewis: World War I came along and the United States got into it. Every young fellow wanted to get into some branch of the service. Besides, there was the draft, so if you didn't volunteer, you would have been drafted. I'd gone in quite early with a group from Cal that had been organized before we got into the war. It was then called the American Field Service. These groups went over to work with the French Army, you know, ambulance drivers. But when the war was declared they were taken into the United States Army.

Interv: Oh, I see.

Lewis: We were sent back to Allentown, Pennsylvania, which was the training camp for the ambulance corps. And some of the first units that got back to Allentown were sent overseas quite quickly. But then, according to the story

Lewis: that went around the camp, the French government or the French military officials said, "We appreciate your sending over ambulance drivers when you were not in the war. But now that the United States is in the war, we would really prefer having you Americans go up to the front lines and fight, rather than carry the French wounded back from the front." That sounded reasonable. So what happened was--whether that story's true or not--they stopped sending the ambulance units overseas. And--after many weeks of waiting with nothing happening--we began transferring out into other services. I and some of my group joined a new organization that was to operate something called Mobile Laboratories. That is, the laboratories were to be attached to the field hospitals, and we were to do laboratory tests--water analysis, blood counts, tb, gonorrhoea, and that sort of thing.

So we were sent to the Army Medical School in Washington for a six weeks course. Then we were sent overseas. And I and another fellow in that group were assigned to the Thirty-First Division and went over with that division. But when we arrived our laboratory hadn't yet appeared, so we instead went to the French resort town of Vichy, which was the headquarters of the medical

Lewis: corps of the United States Army. There I spent the last months of the war. I had expected to be living in a tent in the mud, but instead we were quartered in one of the luxury hotels at Vichy. So my military career was not particularly heroic. (Laughter)

Interv: Did it allow you to get around and see a little of France?

Lewis: Yes, it was some months before we got home. While we waited we did a lot of touring.

WRITING FOR THE LITERARY MAGAZINES

Interv: Were you continuing to write during this period?

Lewis: I did a little bit, yes. But what I chiefly did was to think about where I was heading. I could see that there was no particular future in writing juvenile fiction for magazines. So I decided when I got back to try to write for the adult magazines. So I did. I still wrote boys' stories and articles because that was my chief source of income. But I began writing for the adult magazines.

I tried everything--the pulps--but I got very little there. I sold a few stories to pulp magazines. I also tried the high paying slicks, you know, the Saturday Evening Post and Collier's. I got nowhere with them. Then I finally decided my best bets were the so-called literary magazines. During the next several years I managed to sell to Scribner's, Harper's, and the Atlantic Monthly, New Republic, Saturday Review. I also sold to a number of magazines that no longer exist, such as the Outlook and the Independent, which were weeklies.

Interv: Did you sell non-fiction to them?

Lewis: Mostly non-fiction. The New Republic and the other weeklies didn't take fiction at all, as I remember.

Interv: I hadn't realized that you had started writing non-fiction early, and that you just continued along with fiction. Is that correct?

Lewis: That's right, yes.

Interv: You wrote for the Smart Set, too?

Lewis: Yes. I did quite a number of stories for the Smart Set, and a few of what you might call essays--non-fiction.

Interv: When did you start with the Smart Set? Before the war?

Lewis: I think probably. I'm not altogether sure. But it was mostly after the war. And then when Mencken and Nathan left the Smart Set and founded the American Mercury, I had a couple of articles in that.

Interv: Did you know Mencken?

Lewis: Only by correspondence. I had some letters from him.

Interv: He must have been a fascinating man.

Lewis: He was a prolific letter writer and very prompt. I once read that he would never let a letter go unanswered for more than twenty-four hours. He made a very prompt reply with everything.

Interv: Did Nathan take a less active part in the managing?

Lewis: I think so. I never had a letter from Nathan. He conducted the drama sections of the magazines.

Interv: Was Mencken very exacting as an editor? Did he require changes?

Lewis: No, I don't remember any. With most magazines, in those days, the only way you could find out whether your manuscript had been changed was to read it after it was published. Some editors made a lot of changes. Others just let it go as was.

Interv: The Smart Set represents to me a kind of unique publishing venture. Wasn't this quite a triumph for a young Westerner?

Lewis: No. As a matter of fact, the Smart Set didn't have very high literary standards. It was a sophisticated magazine. They liked a certain type of fiction. They had some established writers. But they didn't have as high a standard as some lesser known magazines. The New Republic, for instance, in those days you had to be a pretty good writer to get in there. And of course Scribner's and Harper's and the Atlantic were the so-called literary magazines.

Interv: Did you feel your being a Westerner affected their views of your contributions?

Lewis: I don't think it made any great difference. Of course, I think the Western writer is under a handicap because most of the magazine editors and most of the book publishers are New Yorkers. It used to seem to us that they'd much rather print a collection of short stories from, say, the New Yorker magazine than take a chance on a book on the West. They knew the local field but they didn't always know the rest of the country.

Interv: They must be beginning to more now.

Lewis: Oh yes. Almost every publisher keeps in touch with the rest of the market.

Interv: We came across a story and an article of yours in the Overland Monthly. Did you write much for that magazine?

Lewis: By the time I came along the Overland Monthly was well past its prime. I think I did what most writers did, I would send to Overland material that I couldn't sell any place else. (Laughter)

Interv: I read a story of yours that I liked in the Overland. It must have been up to previous standards. Something called, "Not Up to Specifications."

Lewis: Yes, I remember that. It was about newspaper work, wasn't it?

Interv: No. "Little Antone" was a newspaper story.

Lewis: That's right, yes.

Interv: "Vigil of Little Antone." That was in McBride's.

Lewis: Yes. That, of course, is a long forgotten magazine.

Interv: That must have been fairly high paying. Was it?

Lewis: I don't remember, but I don't think so. They might have paid me \$50.00.

Interv: Looking over those issues of the Overland, they seemed to have interesting material still at that time though. Did you know any of the people on it then?

Lewis: I think I knew a Virginia Lee, some such name. I think she was the Overland editor in the final phase. I believe she was a poet of some local renown.

Interv: Did you ever try poetry?

Lewis: No, that's one thing I never tried. I used to read a lot of poetry. I knew too much about what good poetry is to try to write any myself.

Interv: In this early post-war period, did you know any other writers in the area then? By then were you looked up by them or did you look them up?

Lewis: Not very much. Looking back on it I must have been something of a lone wolf. I did have a couple of newspaper friends. One of them was Edgar Waite, who was a close

Lewis: friend for many years. As a matter of fact we collaborated--he was then working on the Chronicle as a reporter--on a number of articles in the Sunday Chronicle. But I don't remember any others. Later I knew a number of the local writers.

EUROPE AND NORTH AFRICA

Interv: Then you headed for Europe again.

Lewis: Yes. I'd been planning that for some time and finally gathered enough money to go. I planned to stay as long as I could--as long as I could support myself. I remember I landed in Ireland and from there went to Scotland and England and then France and down into North Africa, Algeria, Tunis...

Interv: How did you happen to go to North Africa then?

Lewis: I was looking for something to write about. I got my mail at the Thomas Cook and Company office in Paris. Whenever a manuscript was accepted I'd have the check sent me there. I was gone about three months on this North Africa trip. I planned then--next I wanted to go to Greece, the Middle East, Turkey and so on. I was looking forward to that trip, but I was running low on money. So I hurried back to Paris to see what luck I'd had. It wasn't very good. When I figured it out I found I had just enough money to buy a third class railroad

Lewis: ticket to Le Havre and a steerage ticket to New York on a Cunard liner. So I hightailed it for home. I think I had four dollars, or the equivalent of four dollars, when I landed in New York.

On the way over I wrote an article on what it was like to travel steerage on a luxury liner. I remember the morning after I landed I went to see an editor of the Outlook, which had accepted several of my travel articles.

Interv: In New York?

Lewis: In New York. I told him I'd like, if possible, a prompt decision on whether they wanted the article because if not, I would try somebody else. He told me he would take it home with him that night and read it, and if I would come around at nine the next morning he would tell me the decision. When I got there promptly at nine o'clock he had a check for \$75.00 waiting for me.

In the meantime when I left Paris I asked Thomas Cook to forward anything that came for me back to the New York office. I waited a few days until the mail would return from Paris. When it arrived I found enough checks so that I could have stayed over and made my trip to Athens and the Middle East. I remember spending the

Lewis: day trying to decide whether to go back or to come out here. I finally decided to come home, and I've always regretted it. I made the wrong decision. I could just as well have spent another six months or so knocking around Europe.

Interv: Were you able to travel and see and write all at the same time?

Lewis: What I used to do was to visit a number of places and gather material. Then I'd settle down for a week or so. I knew a little quiet town on the Riviera called Hyères--the place where Stevenson used to stay. I spent a month there--a very happy month--catching up on writing.

Interv: So you really didn't write as you went?

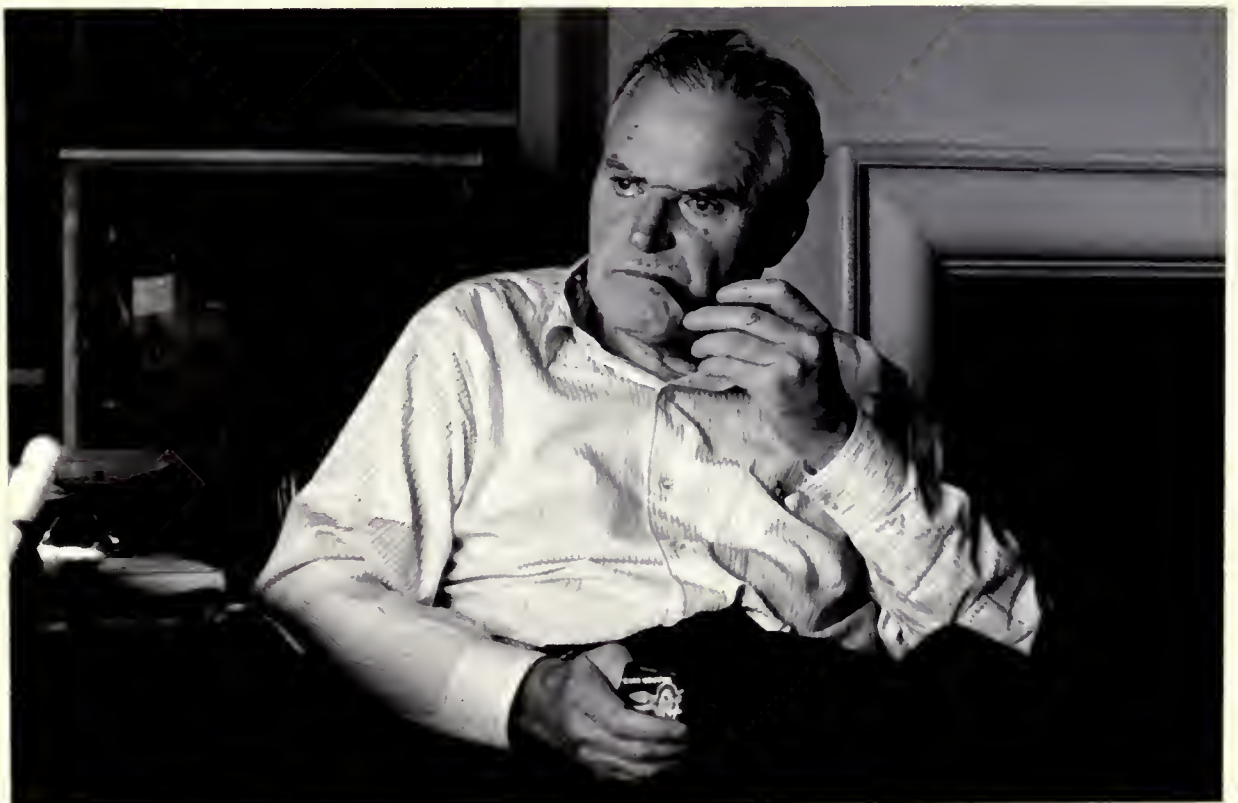
Lewis: Not very much, mostly just taking notes.

Interv: The articles, then, on your return--we noticed in the bibliographies--were both on your travels and also on the American scene. Did you feel that this trip had given you a new insight into what you saw in this country?

Lewis: If so, I wasn't aware of it.



Oscar Lewis being interviewed, June 30, 1965



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THE BOOK CLUB OF CALIFORNIA

Lewis: When I got back, about that time, my connection with the Book Club had begun. In fact it had begun before I went to Europe.

Interv: Oh, did it?

Lewis: Oh yes. It was in 1921 that I first went to work for the Book Club. My beginning salary was \$75.00 a month. But the duties were very light. The office was open from two to four, afternoons, five days a week. It gave me a nice office to work in. So I snapped up the job.

Interv: How did it happen to be offered to you?

Lewis: I was the second paid secretary. The first secretary was Bertha Pope whom I knew in Berkeley. She's now Bertha Damon. She still lives there. She's written two amusing books, one is called Grandma Called it Carnal, about her New England grandmother. The other is a book on gardens called, A Sense of Humus. She's a very clever woman. Bertha was a friend of Albert Bender's, and it was through Albert that she took this job. She held it only for about

Lewis: a year and then she quit. Then I took over temporarily, and stayed on until I made this trip to Europe. When I left it was with the understanding that I could have the job back if I wanted it when I returned.

Interv: Was Clarkson Crane ever one of the interim people? Was he ever secretary?

Lewis: That's right, yes. Clarkson was an old friend of mine. I knew him in Berkeley. He still lives in Berkeley, or perhaps it's El Cerrito.

Interv: He is a writer, is he not?

Lewis: Clarkson wrote several good novels. Then one day he decided he'd said all he wanted to say and so he's written very little since. I understand he has some property, enough to give him an adequate income. He lives comfortably and enjoys life. I think that was a sensible thing to do. A lot of writers once they start don't know when to stop. Their reputations would have been better if they had stopped sooner. Mark Twain is a fine example of that. His last ten years or so most of his work was almost unreadable.

Interv: Yes. Was he kept at it by financial...

Lewis: Oh, by no means. He was very prosperous in his last years. But he was a writer and he just continued to write.

Interv: Who was the other interim secretary? You said there were two.

Lewis: Yes, her name was Maude Fellows. She was a friend of Bertha Pope's. She taught Latin at an East Bay school, Miss Ransom's, I think it is called. She taught also at a local school up on Jackson Street, another girls' school, a private school.

Interv: Then she gave way to you when you returned?

Lewis: That's right. I think she just took it during the vacation periods in her schools.

Interv: Your experiences with the Book Club went back almost to its beginning. No, I see, 1912 is when it was established.

Lewis: That's right. My experience began about a year after the directors decided to formalize it. Up to then it had been run entirely by volunteer help. It got to be something of a burden to them, so they decided to open an office and hire a paid secretary.

Interv: Where was the office?

Lewis: It was at 110 Sutter Street in the old French Bank Building, opposite the 111 Sutter Street Building.

Interv: What was there to do?

Lewis: By the time I took over there were perhaps one hundred fifty members. It was a publishing club. We got out

Lewis: about two books a year. My job was to see the publications through the press, work with the printer, read the proofs, that sort of thing. When the book was published, to send out the announcements, get the orders, wrap up the books, and mail them. Anything that needed to be done I did.

Interv: Did you use the office, then, for your writing also?

Lewis: That's right, yes.

Interv: Did you have to answer the phone when it rang, in or out of hours?

Lewis: For a while I didn't. I would just ignore it. Once in a while somebody would say, "I called this morning," and I'd say, "The Book Club is only open from two to four." I couldn't very well tell them that I heard them ringing and refused to answer. (Laughter)

Interv: We have lots of questions about the Book Club. I don't know how much you know about the background of the Book Club, the time before you started with it.

Lewis: I told what I know to David Magee when he wrote a history of the Club several years ago.

Interv: You said you became secretary first in 1921. We came across a list of charter members of the Club, most of whom must have been still around in 1921. Some of them

Interv: we know of and some are unknown to us. Could I run down the list?

Lewis: Yes, I may be able to identify some of them.

Interv: They are given alphabetically. Lloyd Ackermann.

Lewis: He was a well-known attorney in town.

Interv: Was he particularly interested in the Club?

Lewis: I don't think so, no.

Interv: It's interesting to find out who was interested in fine books.

Lewis: That's right. Of course, a lot of the members probably joined because they were asked by Albert Bender or Alfred Sutro or W.R.K. Young. They were trying to get the Club organized and they asked their friends to join.

Interv: I'll list the charter members and you interrupt if you can tell me anything about them. L.B. Archer, John D. Barry.

Lewis: I didn't realize Barry was a charter member of the Club. He was a journalist who had a column on the old Bulletin under Fremont Older. He lived in Sausalito in a little rustic hotel over there overlooking the bay.

Interv: That was a rather bohemian way of living in that time.

Lewis: Well Barry wasn't a bohemian by any means. He was rather a staid chap. He used to hike on Mt. Tamalpais a lot. I've forgotten what he wrote about but I think it was a

Lewis: literary rather than a political column. Some of his columns were reprinted in a book that, I think, Paul Elder brought out sometime in the 1920's. I seem to recall that.

Interv: When did you know him? Was it during the '20's?

Lewis: Yes. I think it was before I got associated with the Book Club. It was right after World War I, probably in 1919.

Interv: Did you meet him through your other newspaper friends?

Lewis: Probably.

Interv: James D. Blake.

Lewis: He was originally a book dealer and I think a partner of Jack Newbegin. Then he was the representative of Harper and Brothers, publishers, here on the Coast for a long time.

Interv: Eugene J. Bates, H.B. Blatchley, H.U. Brandenstein.

Lewis: Brandenstein was an attorney, a brother of M.J. Brandenstein--the family now call themselves Bransten--who founded the M.J.B. coffee company. He was a local attorney, quite a prominent man.

Interv: Milton A. Bremer.

Lewis: He was, I think, a cousin of Albert Bender and a brother of Ann Bremer, Albert's cousin, who was an artist. I believe he was in the insurance business but I'm not sure.

Interv: Edmund D. Brooks of Minneapolis, A.A. Brown.

Lewis: A.A. Brown was president of the C and H Sugar Company. Quite a group of C and H people were in the early Club. William R.K. Young, who was one of the early presidents, was an official of the company.

Interv: Donald Y. Campbell, Warren D. Clark, Miss L. Averill Cole of Boston.

Lewis: Miss Cole was, as I remember, a quite celebrated book-binder. I suppose she got into the Club because of W.R.K. Young's wife, Belle McMurtry--who was also a very able book-binder.

Interv: Robert I. Cowan.

Lewis: He was a bibliographer, the author of the Club's first book.

Interv: What sort of person was he?

Lewis: He was physically quite a small man. He was an old man when I knew him--grey-haired. He was not at all an aggressive sort of person. He had a book shop, originally, which he operated out of his home. He was one of the town's first dealers in Californiana. Cowan lived on Treat Avenue in the Mission district. He was a close friend of John Henry Nash. I used to meet him at Nash's office every once in a while. He later became librarian for William Andrews Clark, in Los Angeles. His son,

Lewis: Robert Cowan, Jr., still lives there.

Interv: Hasn't he done some writing too?

Lewis: The son? I believe so.

Interv: Alfred Ehrman.

Lewis: He was a wealthy San Franciscan but I don't know anything in particular about him.

Interv: Alfred Esberg, H. Alfred Fowler of Kansas City, Dr. John Gallagher, Dr. John Gallwey.

Lewis: Gallwey was a prominent local physician. He lived on Sacramento at about Hyde or Leavenworth Street. You probably recall his home. It's set back from the street and surrounded by gardens, which are probably the only ones in that neighborhood. It's a couple of blocks toward downtown from Polk Street. He was a well known doctor. I think he lived there until ten or fifteen years ago.

Interv: Alexander Goldstein, Morgan Gunst.

Lewis: Morgan Gunst was president of the Book Club in later years.

Interv: I know later he did have a very considerable interest in books and was a collector. Was he earlier? Or did the Book Club help form his interest in it?

Lewis: I think it may be that the Book Club fostered his interest

Lewis: in book collecting. He later became a celebrated collector of French bindings. And I think he gave his collection to Stanford when he died.

Interv: Miss Alice Hager, Mrs. Phoebe Hearst.

Lewis: You know as much as I do about Mrs. Hearst.

Interv: How did she happen to be a member?

Lewis: Somebody probably asked her.

Interv: Miss Babette Heller, John Howell.

Lewis: He, of course, was a book dealer.

Interv: Did you know him?

Lewis: Oh yes, quite well.

Interv: He was a formative figure in San Francisco life, wasn't he?

Lewis: He started by working for another local book dealer, A.M. Robinson. Robinson's shop was on Union Square on Stockton Street, on the corner of Maiden Lane and Stockton Street. Then Howell opened his own shop. He once wrote his reminiscences, some of which were published in the Book Club Quarterly. These have recently been republished in a Book Club anthology called Second Reading.

Interv: Did Howell have any particular relationship with writers in San Francisco, or more with printers?

Lewis: He published local writers occasionally. For instance,

Lewis: he published the extension of William Heath Davis' Sixty Years in California. He called it Seventy-Five Years in California.

Interv: William Heath Davis was no longer an up-and-coming writer at that time. (Laughter)

Lewis: No, evidently not. But that Howell edition of his book has become quite scarce. It's a very valuable edition. It's beautifully illustrated with documents Howell had in his own shop. Of course, Howell's specialty was the Bible. He collected Bibles and dealt in different editions of the Bible and different translations.

Interv: Miss Pauline Jacobson. Was she a newspaperwoman?

Lewis: That's right, yes. I think she was another member of the staff of the Bulletin under Fremont Older.

Interv: Miss Evelyn Levy, Miss Florence Lundborg.

Lewis: She was a well known artist, a friend of Ann Bremer.

Interv: Laurens Maynard, Mrs. Laurens Maynard, Miss Belle McMurtry.

Lewis: Yes. Belle McMurtry was a bookbinder and wife of W.R.K. Young.

Interv: A.F. Morrison, Fred Myrtle, Miss Josephine Neeley, John Newbegin. Did you know him very well? What sort of man was he?

Lewis: Oh yes, I knew him well. He was a hearty, back-slapping,

Lewis: very approachable sort of fellow. And he was a very good book dealer. His was one of the best shops in town. Physically he was a rather tall, spare individual.

Interv: D.C. Norcross, Edward F. O'Day. He must have been a very amusing chap.

Lewis: Yes, he was a very well read fellow. He could quote practically anything in English literature. He was also a classical scholar. He loved to use Latin phrases in his writing. He was an able writer.

Interv: What did he write in those days?

Lewis: For years, as you may know, he edited The Recorder, a local legal paper.

Interv: Had he been with The Recorder early, in the '20s?

Lewis: I'm not sure but I rather think he was. He did a lot of writing for John Nash--introductions to books that Nash published and that sort of thing. He was quite active in the Family Club. I believe he used to write skits and one act plays that the Club produced. He was a rather slightly built fellow. I remember he had sort of red hair or sandy-colored hair. His sister, Nell O'Day, was the long-time librarian of the Nash Library.

Interv: Ricardo J. Orozco, Robert C. Owens, James Walter Scott, Grant H. Smith, Will Sparks, Alfred Sutro.

Lewis: Sutro later became president of the Club and remained so for many years--as long as he lived, in fact. He was, of course, a very well known attorney--the head of Pillsbury, Madison and Sutro.

Interv: How did he happen to be so much interested in books?

Lewis: He had a good collection. He was very much interested in books. I think that collection is still intact. I don't remember its ever being sold.

Interv: Was he a fairly learned man?

Lewis: Yes. He amused himself in his later years by writing nonsense jingles for his grandchildren. I know he published some of them. In fact I have a couple he gave me.

Interv: But was his book-collecting rather more serious than that?

Lewis: Oh yes.

Interv: What field did he collect in?

Lewis: I think it was English literature. He was a close friend of A. Edward Newton, who wrote a great deal about book collecting, and they used to write back and forth.

Interv: Oscar Sutro.

Lewis: He was Alfred's brother. Although he too was a collector, I don't think he was as ardent a collector as Alfred.

Interv: Dr. Edward Robeson Taylor.

Lewis: He was the father of the Taylor brothers who had the print shop. Of course, he was also a physician, quite a

Lewis: well known poet, and a politician. He was one of the San Francisco mayors around the turn of the century. He published several volumes of poetry. I think he was also an attorney. He was also a printer, I think. In the beginning I believe he was associated with the printing firm.

Interv: For heaven's sake! He really was a versatile man.

Lewis: He was indeed.

Interv: What sort of looking man was he?

Lewis: I only saw him once or twice. And my memory of him is quite hazy. I remember his two sons quite well.

Interv: Do you know E.H. Tordhoff of Berkeley? Issac O. Upham?

Lewis: I think Upham operated a stationery store in San Francisco.

Interv: Wallace W. Wachob, Edgar Walter.

Lewis: Walter was a sculptor and belonged to the family of D.N. and E. Walter, you know, wholesale carpets and such. But he was quite a well known sculptor. He did a plaque that was used for the Book Club. That's how I happen to remember him. It was a bronze plaque given honorary and life members. It was later made into a little design that could be impressed on the membership certificates.

Interv: John I. Walter, was that his brother?

Lewis: Yes, that was his brother. His widow, Florence Walter,

Lewis: became president of the Book Club. She lives out at the end of Hyde Street.

Interv: Was her husband especially interested in books? Or was he one of the more casual ones?

Lewis: I think he was one of the people who bought the books as they came out and paid his dues, and supported the Club.

Interv: Miss Marian Walter.

Lewis: I'm not sure of her identity.

Interv: Finally, on the list is W.R.K. Young, whom you've already mentioned.

Albert Bender

Interv: To go back to Albert Bender, was he the one person most responsible for the Book Club or where did he stand in relation to it?

Lewis: He wasn't the one person responsible for it. But later on, after it was established, he was the one who was most consistently interested in it. Albert really kept it going during the doldrums, up until they got a permanent office and hired a permanent secretary. At

Lewis: least that's what I heard. And then as long as he lived he remained chairman of the publication committee. He was the one who arranged for lectures often because he knew the celebrities who came to town. He'd schedule a talk before the Club; partly for the good of the Club, and partly to get a fee for his friends. (Laughter) Albert did that also with the publications. In some instances like early George Sterling items and Ina Coolbrith and Emma Frances Dawson. These were writers he knew could use some financial help. So a good way for him to do it--to save their feelings--was to say, "Let us print your poems and we can give you a small honorarium." That was his diplomatic way.

Interv: Did he ever print things that weren't worth printing?

Lewis: (Laughter) Well, a lot of the things the Book Club printed in the early days were not masterpieces of literature. Let's put it that way.

Interv: I think I remember some George Sterling that was worth printing, wasn't it? That was late in his career.

Lewis: The first Sterling volume the Book Club published was Thirty-Five Sonnets, which came out in 1917. One of his last things was an anthology of California poets. Sterling was one of the editors. It came out in 1925

Lewis: and, as I remember, George Sterling died in '26.

Interv: He must have been an interesting man to know--a kind of convivial man, was he?

Lewis: He was rather a shy, withdrawn person, not at all assertive. People seem to have the picture of him as roistering around town and all. But if he got drunk and raised hell he did it in a gentlemanly way, you can be sure of that. He used to come into the Book Club quite often. The thing that brought him in was that the Club had published a number of his books. One was Thirty-Five Sonnets, another was The Testimony of the Suns. Yet another was this anthology, Continent's End, and still another was a play called Lilith. Every once in a while someone would want a copy of some particular book. So he'd come in and get it. He always paid cash for it, and usually he'd write an inscription. Then he'd ask me if I'd mail it out, sort of apologetically. I was mailing out books every day, so it was no problem. But he was never one to impose on people.

Interv: Who was Emma Frances Dawson?

Lewis: She was a writer who had some reputation way back in the '90s. She was in the same group with Ambrose Bierce and she may have even been in the Bret Harte era. The reason

Lewis: the Club printed her book, A Gracious Visitation, was that Albert Bender somehow learned that she was still living. Everybody thought that she had died long before. This was in 1921. Albert learned that she was living at Palo Alto in a tiny house and that she was very poor. And, as I said before, this was one of the instances where Albert had the Club publish a book to do a favor for the author. I remember the Club mailed her, when the book was finished, a check for \$100. Not long thereafter she was found dead in her cabin. The coroner's jury said death was due to malnutrition, a polite word for starvation. The Club's check was found among her effects. She had never cashed it. Sort of a tragic happening.

Interv: Yes. Well Albert Bender seems to have had a large acquaintance among all sorts of people.

Lewis: He certainly did.

Interv: How did he manage?

Lewis: He managed because he was practically tireless. He loved people and he liked to be in the middle of everything that was going on. If there was a party somewhere, you were almost sure to find Albert there. Later in the day, if you happened to go to another party in San Fran-

Lewis: cisco or even in Oakland or Palo Alto, chances are you would find Albert at that one, too. He loved people and he loved to do favors for them. He liked the recognition he got for his benefactions. That was part of it, but not all. It was sometimes said that Albert's primary interest was publicity--that he gave the things he gave because he knew people would talk about them. Well, I happen to know of instances where Albert was generous to people when there was no possibility of anybody ever knowing about it. So it wasn't because he was a headline hunter entirely, although he did like recognition.

Interv: It's a slow way to get recognition, to sponsor very young people.

Lewis: That's true.

Interv: How did he happen to be so much interested in books?

Lewis: I don't know. I think his father, in Dublin, was a preacher--but I'm not sure of that. I don't know how it happened.

Interv: He was not a particularly well-educated man, was he?

Lewis: I don't think so. But he was a widely read man. He knew Irish literature. He could quote everybody from William Butler Yeats to the early Irish poets. And he

Lewis: liked writers and he liked artists. I guess that may have been because his cousin was quite a well known artist, Ann Bremer.

Interv: Was that, do you think, how he met some of the artists at first?

Lewis: It could be, but I doubt it. Albert never had any trouble meeting people. He wasn't at all shy. He could establish a friendship on terms of intimacy in a shorter time than anyone else I ever knew of.

He'd be introduced to a perfect stranger and they'd talk for fifteen minutes and you'd find them pounding each other on the back and using first names with each other. You knew Albert, didn't you? You must have seen him at times.

Interv: Not often, no.

Lewis: Of course, Albert's interest was not in history. I think you rarely saw him at the historical organizations. He was often at the libraries and at the art galleries and that sort of thing. That's what really interested him.

Interv: Was he tremendously wealthy or did he just give a lot of money away as he made it?

Lewis: I don't think he was ever a wealthy man. When he started in the insurance business he had a group of his friends

Lewis: who were also just getting established. As they prospered they just sort of automatically gave him their business. And he, no doubt, had a very substantial income. He had a little office on California Street. He spent his money as it came in. He had a large income, but also a large outlay. He'd go up to Chinatown a couple of times a week and order things right and left--small gifts that he could give to visitors. You rarely saw Albert--when you went to his office--that he didn't press some gift on you before you left--whether it was a necktie or, for a woman, some little object he picked up in Chinatown. Or books--he'd buy books, if he liked them, by the dozen. He'd pass them out to people he thought would enjoy them.

Interv: What was his office like?

Lewis: It was a small office at 311 California Street--the old Robert Dollar Building. I remember he was on the third floor. He had a staff of I think three people. Mark Altman was his chief assistant. Another was Paul Nathan. Albert's desk was one of the old-fashioned roll-tops. Albert shared his room with B.F. Brisac, an old friend who was also in the insurance business. I could never figure how Brisac ever did any business.

Lewis: Albert was always entertaining friends there, and they were always talking a blue streak. You'd look over and see Brisac leaning over his desk completely absorbed. Maybe he stuffed cotton in his ears, I don't know. (Laughter)

Interv: Did Albert Bender have a very elaborate home or apartment?

Lewis: He had quite a nice apartment on Post--it's called the Studio Building, on Post and Franklin, I think it is.

Interv: Were the Grabhorns just a block away then?

Lewis: No. In those days the Grabhorns--originally they were on Kearny Street near Market. Then they moved to Pine Street, and from there to Commercial Street. No, Albert had died by the time they moved out on Sutter Street.

Interv: I see. Did he write occasionally?

Lewis: He wrote a great many letters. And he wrote a great many inscriptions in books that he gave away. But other than that I don't recall his ever having written anything.

Interv: No introductions to friends' writings?

Lewis: No. He would commission some friend to do it and somehow arrange that the friend got a fee of \$50 or \$100. That gave him more pleasure than writing the introductions himself.

Interv: Did you say or imply that it was he who kind of kept the Club going, financially, during lean years? Was that

Interv: correct?

Lewis: I'm not sure that his help was entirely financial. He kept interest alive and he kept the publication program going, and the lecture program. I don't know what part he had in financing the Club. But in the early days when the Club first hired a paid secretary, a group of the directors agreed--for a certain time, I think for two years--to pay so much a month into a special fund for the secretary's salary. I think by the time I came around that fund had been exhausted. (Laughter) But it permitted the Club to have a secretary when the normal income wouldn't have.

Interv: Someone told us that you had put in a lot of time and effort in the depression years, beyond the call of duty, to keep the Club going.

Lewis: It wasn't beyond the call of duty. It was partly for my own protection. I remember one director's meeting in the early 1930's when membership was dropping off very fast. In those days the membership was limited to five hundred. Well it dropped down to below three hundred in, I think, less than a year. Because of the depression, people had to look closely at their budgets and see where they could cut out. It was nice to belong to the Club, but that was one expense that could be eliminated. So

Lewis: they crossed it off. At one of our director's meetings, it was seriously debated whether to try to keep the Club going or to close it down and perhaps revive it later. I think it was Alfred Sutro who said it was more or less up to me whether the Club survived or not. We decided to give it some thought and see what could be done to keep our remaining members on the roll and to attract others. One of the proposals made at the next meeting was to start a little quarterly--the one which is now thirty years old.

We had discussed other plans--the purpose was to ask people to join the Club for what they would get out of it--rather than asking them to join just because it was a worthy institution. One plan was to make occasional gifts to the members. Out of that evolved the plan to distribute what were called keepsakes. One of a group of twelve folders would be sent to the members each month during the course of the year. That practice of distributing keepsakes, which, like the quarterly, was also started in 1933, has developed into a very interesting and quite valuable thing. So far as I know, the Club is the only organization that has ever done this. I have a complete set of keepsakes, and when I look them

Lewis: over I'm surprised that they contain so much valuable, interesting material.

Interv: It must have taken a tremendous amount of organizing and riding herd on people.

Lewis: It was fairly easy during the depression because here were the printers--they, too, like the Club, wanted to stay in business but they had very little work--and the keepsakes usually consist of twelve parts, so we could spread them around. Each part was done by a different printer. The printer was glad to get any work to keep his shop busy. And he'd do it for some ridiculously small price--something like \$50 for five hundred folders. But that was all we could afford.

Interv: Did you then suggest initiating these publications as a way of pulling it out of the doldrums?

Lewis: Yes, that was the idea. The thing to do was to try to make the Club offer a bargain to the members, so they'd feel that they couldn't afford not to belong.

The Club didn't reach that goal but once members came back--it's hard to judge just what part of the revival of the Club was due to the return of good times. But it was also partly because of the added services we offered.

Interv: Did everybody have to cut back on finances? Did they continue renting their clubroom and so forth?

Lewis: Yes, they kept the office, but the finances were already at the irreducible minimum. (Laughter) You couldn't cut them any further--salary or rent or the rest of it.

Interv: Did you serve without salary for a while?

Lewis: No. But I was sometimes a bit behind in salary. But so were all the creditors of the Club. Some had to wait until some money came in before we could pay our printers and others.

Interv: The Quarterly was always printed by the Grabhorns was it?

Lewis: It was for a long time. Then for about two years, I think it was, Taylor and Taylor printed it. Then the Grabhorns took it on again. And finally this year, for the first time in thirty years, the Grabhorns stopped printing it. They decided that thirty years was enough. A young fellow named Arden Philpot, who lives over in Marin County, is now the printer. He does quite a nice job.

Interv: That's a hard act to follow, as they say.

Lewis: That's right, yes, it is.

Interv: The book publishing program, then, just continued as occasional during those years.

Lewis: That's right. Far fewer books were published during the

Lewis: depression years.

Interv: And you edited The Quarterly yourself?

Lewis: Yes, for the first seven or eight years. To give variety I'd sometimes publish something under an assumed name.

Interv: What were your nom de plumes in it? Do you remember them?

Lewis: I don't remember. But I remember that in this anthology we recently published, one of my unsigned articles was used. I used occasionally, in my boys' stories, to use a nom de plume. I sometimes called myself E.N. Emmerick. Where I dug that up I'll never know.

Interv: Did you use that in the Book Club occasionally, too?

Lewis: I think probably if you go through the files you might find it once or twice.

Interv: Were there other members beyond that list that I went through who were particularly prominent in the Book Club?

Lewis: Oh yes. One of the things Albert used to do when some literary celebrity came to town was to have the Club make him an honorary member. Men like Edwin Markham, Witter Bynner, and A. Edward Newton. Witter Bynner is still an honorary member. He lives in Santa Fe.

Interv: Did you know him?

Lewis: Yes, very well. In fact I've corresponded with him from

Lewis: time to time until a few months ago. He's now quite ill. So I haven't heard from him recently. He has always been a good friend of the Club.

Interv: What sort of man is he? I have heard people who have visited him in New Mexico say that he was very charming.

Lewis: Oh, he is. He's really a charmer. Very full of life and amusing--full of funny stories--a real bohemian, in the best sense, I would say.

Interv: He's a very fine poet, also. His reputation has continued very steady.

Lewis: That's right. He published another book just recently. When he first got out of college in the early 1900's, he went to New York and got a job with McClure's Magazine. There he met a great many people--O. Henry was one of them. I've tried many times to get him to write his reminiscences of that period but I don't think he ever did. He wrote a book on D.H. Lawrence, called Journey With Genius. He sort of piloted the Lawrences around Mexico.

Interv: How did he happen to come to San Francisco from New York, do you know?

Lewis: He came out here just before World War I and gave lectures over at Cal. That's when I met him.

Like many poets, he was a pacifist. He was not

Lewis: popular with the people who wanted us to get into World War I. I remember he was suspect in many quarters because he was opposed to war.

Interv: Then he just settled down out here after lecturing at Cal?

Lewis: He never lived here very long. But he used to come back quite often. I think it was not long after World War I that he went to live in Santa Fe.

Interv: Were there other writers of that period who were in and out of the Book Club, too?

Lewis: I'm trying to think. Mary Austin was an honorary member. I remember she once gave a talk before the Club. Robinson Jeffers came later--in the mid-twenties. But Jeffers was never particularly active in the Club. He, too, was an honorary member. And the Club published one of his books of poems.

SAN FRANCISCO PRINTERS

Interv: The printers, I suppose, you had much to do with constantly, didn't you?

Lewis: Yes. I had to see the books through the press.

Interv: Who was doing most of the printing when you were first with the Book Club, then?

Lewis: John Nash was. The Grabhorns had just come to town. I remember one of my first assignments was to follow a book through the Grabhorn Press.

Interv: Maybe a better initiation than through the Nash Press, for a first time. (Laughter)

Lewis: That's right. It was, as you can imagine, a very informal sort of a place. I remember the press was then at 47 ^{Kearny} ~~Pine~~ Street, just off Market. It was a very narrow building; on the ground floor was a candy store called the Orange Blossom. I think the Grabhorn shop was on the fifth floor. The kitchen where the Orange Blossom candy was made was on the second floor, and there was a combination passenger and freight elevator.

Lewis: Trays of Orange Blossom chocolates would be wheeled into the elevator, and of course the operator had his back to you. Later I used to tell the Grabhorns that I knew the reason why they didn't like chocolates; they'd had an overdose when they were on Kearny Street. (Laughter) One of them once replied, "We might not like chocolates but we're not opposed to orange blossoms." Ed and Bob had both been married twice. (Laughter) Ed later married for the third time.

Interv: Were the Grabhorn brothers just working alone--was there anyone with them at that time?

Lewis: Not in the first months. But as time went on there were a series of helpers, some of them pretty picturesque.

Interv: Some of them have become quite well known in their own right. But I suppose there were many who haven't.

Lewis: I think they were all talented people by the time they got out of the Grabhorn shop. They learned a lot about printing while they were there.

Interv: Wasn't Mallette Dean one--that was later I suppose?

Lewis: He was one of a large group of artists who did work at the shop. From the beginning the shop attracted a quite talented group of artists. Valenti Angelo, for

Lewis: many years, was the staff artist. Before him were Job Sinel, Harold Von Schmidt, and Donald McKay. Angelo and McKay later went to New York to do book work there. Harold Von Schmidt was quite a well known advertising artist.

Interv: But then this was another classification than their helpers around the shop. I guess I threw you off by switching over to Mallette Dean.

Lewis: Some of the artists actually worked at the shop. It wasn't just an occasional assignment. It was full time work.

Interv: I meant printing apprentices. Did they have a succession of those, too, in the shop?

Lewis: They did later but they weren't all just apprentices. Sometimes they'd hire experienced printers to operate the presses and so on. Probably the best known of their apprentices was Gregg Anderson. Gregg later went back to Los Angeles and joined up with Ward Ritchie to form the firm of Anderson and Ritchie. He had a very promising career. But he was killed in World War II during the Normandy landing.

Then there was John Ira Gannon, Jack Gannon, who was a very able and picturesque fellow.

Interv: Whatever happened to him?

Lewis: He came from Oregon and he went back to Oregon and died there quite young. He used to stick around the shop after work and compose poems and set them up and make them into little books, which he illustrated with woodblocks he cut himself. Some of them are quite charming. I have one of his books which has only about a dozen pages. He called it, "The Complete Works of John Ira Gannon." (Laughter)

Interv: Were there other young men of Gregg Anderson's stature or was he outstanding?

Lewis: There were quite a lot of them. One was Bill Roth, William Matson Roth, who is the man behind the recent Ghirardelli Square development. He was an apprentice there for several months. He and Jane Grabhorn and another girl, Jane Swinnerton, founded the Colt Press.

Interv: That was a spirited venture.

Lewis: Yes.

Interv: What was that first book that you saw through the Grabhorn Press? Do you remember?

Lewis: I think it was A Gracious Visitation, the Emma Frances Dawson book. That's the first book the Grabhorns did for the Club.

Interv: They have always had a reputation for operating on their own time scheme, shall I say. Did they then? Or when they were younger were they faster? (Laughter)

Lewis: No. They did things when and the way they wanted it. They were always experimenting. And if they'd get a book two-thirds through and then decide that they wanted to do it another way, they would scrap it all. They were not money conscious at all. They had no cost system of bookkeeping, I'm sure, or they wouldn't have done some of these things. But it was good business in the long run as it turned out.

Interv: Did you get initiated in the Nash shop soon after?

Lewis: Well probably, because in my first period the Club alternated the books between Nash and Grabhorn, with an occasional Taylor and Taylor book.

Interv: The Nash shop must have been a strong contrast to Grabhorn.

Lewis: It was. When I first knew the shop it was a much smaller place than it later became. It was just one large room on a corner on Sansome Street. But quite early within a year or two, he had expanded--someone financed a building for him and named it the John Henry Nash Building. The Nash shop occupied the entire top floor.

Interv: Who financed it, do you know?

Lewis: I don't remember. I may have known at one time. But it was probably one of Nash's wealthy friends. He had a knack for getting wealthy sponsors--William Randolph Hearst, the Clark Brothers, William Andrews and Charles W. Clark, and others--James Coffroth, the promoter, (fight promoter). His later office, in the John Henry Nash Building, was divided into two parts. As you got off the elevator, if you turned to the left, you would be in the shop--the composing room--he never had a press. The press work was done elsewhere, but the type was set there and the design and all. Then if you turned to the right, you were in the library, which was quite elaborately fitted up. He had a large collection of books on printing and many examples of the work of the modern and early fine book printers. It was very much of a contrast. On one side was the workroom, well equipped and all, but no luxury. The luxury was all on the library side.

Interv: Where did you generally find Nash himself?

Lewis: He was nearly always at the type case or in front of the composing stone. That's where he worked. He always wore an immaculate blue smock.

Interv: Did he put on a good show? That's the impression I had.

Lewis: That's it, yes. He knew what a master printer ought to look like, so he did all he could to look the part. And he succeeded very well.

Interv: How was he on schedules? Did he keep to a time schedule?

Lewis: I think so, so far as I know. Of course he liked to do few books, and do them very elaborately. He thought nothing of taking an entire edition back to Leipzig to have it hand bound in vellum. He'd order paper specially made and watermarked with his name at the Van Gelder mill in Holland. He liked to do everything on a grand scale. He had wealthy clients who would permit him to do that. So everything went well with him while he was riding high. But when the depression came on--that's the difference between Nash and Grabhorn--when the depression came on Nash couldn't cut corners. So his inspiration dried up and presently he closed his shop.

On the other hand, when the depression came, the Grabhorns went in for less expensive books. They cashed in on the growing interest in Californiana. During the next few years they brought out two series of books of Western Americana. At first, people said they couldn't possibly sell them. It was during the worst

Lewis: of the depression years. Some of the books sold for as little as two dollars each. But now they bring many times that much. It's very hard for collectors to get a complete set. People used to say, "What Ed Grabhorn needs is a business manager." They were wrong. That's the last thing in the world he needs. In spite of his casual manner of doing business, he knows how to make the shop show a profit.

Interv: What of the Westgate Press? You were involved in that, were you not?

Lewis: That was an offshoot of the Grabhorn Press. One day Bob Grabhorn and I decided to get in on the booming book market. That was in 1929, when limited editions, and practically everything else was being snapped up immediately. So we decided to start by publishing in book form short stories and essays by well known writers, just to try the plan out. I remember I wrote eight writers, both here and in England, ranging all the way from Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell to Lewis Mumford and John Steinbeck--people like that. Of the eight, six wrote back that they were delighted at the prospect of having their stories published. We had offered to pay them \$250, plus ten copies of their

Lewis: book. So we had no trouble getting material to publish. Part of the plan was to have each copy signed by the author. This we did by sending the sheets to the authors in advance, before the books were bound. After we had signed up our authors we announced the Westgate Signed Editions. We got a very encouraging response. Many people ordered individual titles and quite a few wanted the whole series. For a while we did fine, but we had one piece of bad luck--that of starting in 1929.

Interv: (Laughter) Did the Grabhorns print them?

Lewis: Yes. They were all printed at the shop.

Interv: About how many did you do?

Lewis: We did four of the Signed Editions--books by Sherwood Anderson, Lewis Mumford, Havelock Ellis, and Virginia Woolf. Later a number of other books were published under the Westgate imprint but they were really Grabhorn books. Instead of using the Grabhorn imprint as publisher, the Westgate name was used.

Interv: I see. I kind of got out of order on this. I meant to go on and ask you about more Book Club printers. Taylor and Taylor was next on our list.

Lewis: The Taylor brothers were primarily general printers. They didn't, by any means, specialize in book work.

Lewis: The firm was run by the two sons of Edward Robeson Taylor. One of them, it was Henry, had gone back to study printing under D.B. Updike at Harvard. Updike was a Boston printer who had a great deal to do with raising the standards of American printing, especially book printing.

The Taylors were a very able pair. They did excellent work. It was quite different from either Nash or Grabhorn.

Interv: This was long after Nash had parted from them.

Lewis: Yes. The firm was originally Taylor, Nash and Taylor. Then Nash went into business by himself. Ed was the older brother and Henry the younger. They were both, you might say, scholarly printers, which neither Nash nor Grabhorn were. They had studied the theory of printing, they knew the history of printing, and all that. They did some excellent books for the Club and for others. Of course, as I said, their bread and butter work was commercial printing for big corporations. They did a lot of work for Standard Oil. Then only a year or two ago, after both Taylors had died and the firm was being run by Jim Elliot, Bob Washbish, and some others, the shop was filled with the equipment to do

Lewis: commercial printing on a large scale, great expensive presses and all that. Then Standard Oil decided to use a different method of printing, which their shop couldn't handle. After losing that big account, the owners threw up the sponge and retired. So Taylor and Taylor is no longer in existence.

Interv: Were all of these three printers that you've discussed fairly easy to work with? I'm sure the Grabhorns were. Was Nash reasonably easy?

Lewis: One reason it was easy to work with the printers was that one of the Club's rules was to impose as few restrictions as possible. We would say, "Here's the manuscript, make as good a book as you can out of it." The printers liked that because they didn't often get such commissions. So there was rarely any argument because the Club didn't ask them to do the work in any special way.

Interv: Did you ever use Johnck and Seeger?

Lewis: Yes. In the '30s and early '40s they did a number of books for the Club. John Johnck has since died. Harold Seeger is still in the printing business. I don't remember anything in particular that I could tell you about their shop.

Interv: They weren't at it long enough I suppose to achieve the stature of...

Lewis: With them as with practically all the other shops, they were supported by the general run of commercial printing. They all welcomed an opportunity to do an occasional book. It was a change of pace. But they were not primarily book printers.

Interv: Did they do their own press work?

Lewis: I think so. My memory is yes. I think all printers did except Nash.

Interv: Who did Nash have to do his press work?

Lewis: I believe it was a firm called the Trade Pressroom, somewhere on Sansome Street. It may have been in the same building as Nash, but I'm not sure.

Interv: Did you know Thomas C. Russell?

Lewis: No, I never knew him. But he operated a press in the basement of his house in the Richmond District. He edited the books he reprinted--mostly rare Californiana. I used to see them in the second-hand book stores all the time, at very low prices. I thought they'd last forever at two or three dollars each, but they've now become hard to get hold of and quite expensive. So when I have to look at one I have to go to one of the

Lewis: libraries and look at it there.

Interv: Were there any other printers that the Book Club dealt with regularly?

Lewis: There was the Windsor Press, which was run by two young Australians, the Johnson brothers. They had a shop on Bush.

Interv: We knew them.

Lewis: One of them I still see occasionally. Their names were James and Cecil. I could never tell them apart. They stayed in business quite a while and did quite a lot of nice work.

Interv: Did you ever have any so-called private presses do any work--any non-commercial printers?

Lewis: They did some of the keepsakes. We used to pass them around to different printers. There was Wilder Bentley, over in Berkeley, I suppose you'd call his a private press.

Interv: Was it? I don't know anything about him. Was he something else by vocation?

Lewis: He ran this press, I don't think he made a living at it. He may have taught. He may have taught a class in printing at the University Extension. I don't know. He later went back to Pittsburgh, to the Laboratory Press. Did you know Porter Garnett? He came from out

Lewis: here, then he went back and established the Laboratory Press at the University of Pittsburgh. Bentley joined him there.

Wilder was a member of a rather wealthy San Francisco family. I don't think he had to make a living at his Berkeley shop. He was more fortunate than most printers. (Laughter)

Interv: We meant to ask you about the Colt Press, in relation to the Westgate Press. But I see now that they had no direct relationship.

Lewis: No. It came along after the Westgate Press. The prime mover in it was Jane Grabhorn, Bob's wife.

Interv: When did she come into active work in Grabhorn's organization?

Lewis: She came in because one of the young apprentices at the shop was her brother Bill Bissell, and it was through Bill, I assume, that she and Bob met. Then after they were married, she came down to the press and learned typesetting and binding. She showed up every day and still does. She and Bill Roth and Jane Swinnerton founded this Colt Press. They were looking for something to publish and I, in a weak moment, agreed to write them something about Lola Montez. I did a little

Lewis: book called Lola Montez in California. That was their first book.

Interv: It apparently gave them a good start.

Lewis: I think they kept on in spite of that book rather than because of it. (Laughter)

Interv: They began that just as the depression was beginning to mitigate, didn't they?

Lewis: I think so. I forget the date.

Interv: 1938, I think.

Lewis: Yes, the depression was pretty well over by then.

Interv: I think we've gone through the whole list of printers here. I'm sure there are many more things to be said about them.

Lewis: Well maybe later if you find any bald spots that you think I can grow some hair on, let me know about it.

Interv: (Laughter) We won't exhaust you any further today.

WRITER AND ARTIST NEIGHBORS

Interv: You lived on Russian Hill when you first moved to San Francisco, didn't you?

Lewis: That's right. On the Taylor Street hill. There were some interesting people living there then.

Interv: Such as?

Lewis: Well, one was Stella Benson, an English girl and a very clever writer. She had lived in China before coming here. She and her husband, whose name was Shamus--I forget his last name--rented one of the little cottages on west slope of Russian Hill. They used to give very entertaining parties. She was in frail health while she was here and I believe she died soon after they returned to England.

Interv: It was before you were living in San Francisco, wasn't it, that Stella Benson was here?

Lewis: I believe so. I was probably still living in Berkeley then.

Interv: When did you move to the city permanently, then?

Lewis: It was 1925, when I got married. I had been living in Berkeley, mostly at home with my mother, until that time.

Interv: What was your wife's maiden name?

Lewis: Betty Mooney. She was--and still is--an interior decorator. She had a relative, a cousin, who had an office in the French Bank Building, on the same floor with the Book Club. That's how we met. We celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary a few months ago.

Interv: Did you move then to the Taylor Street house?

Lewis: That's right, yes, 1644 Taylor. It's one of those pseudo-Indian, Taos, New Mexico type of apartment houses. (Laughter) There was a time when they built a lot of them all over town--there's one down at the end of this street.

Interv: The neighbors that you had on Taylor Street sound like you just happened to move into the most interesting block in the city.

Lewis: Well it was purely by accident. There happened to be an apartment vacant at a price we could afford to pay. That was all there was to it.

Interv: Would you mention the neighbors?

Lewis: Maynard Dixon lived across the street. He was then

Lewis: married to Dorothea Lange, the photographer. I haven't heard of her in a long time. Does she still live in the neighborhood?

Interv: No. She's married to a professor at the University of California, who's just retired, Professor Paul Taylor.

Lewis: Then diagonally across Taylor Street from us, in a house still standing, lived Colonel Wood, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, and Sara Bard Field. The house is on the corner of Broadway and Taylor, on the northwest corner. There's a high stone fence about the property and the house is set back among trees. Sara Field now lives in Berkeley. Her daughter is also married to a college professor, James Caldwell. Colonel Wood was this girl's step-father.

Interv: That was one of the rather scandalous but respectable arrangements, wasn't it?

Lewis: I suppose so. Everybody accepted it. Colonel Wood was a picturesque old chap.

Interv: Was he writing? Was that in the Heavenly Discourse period?

Lewis: I think he had already written it. He still was writing. I know he had poems in the left wing publications, The Masses and others. He was a socialist, of course.

Interv: Was Sara Bard Field writing at the same time?

Lewis: Yes.

Interv: You had a creative, busy group there.

Lewis: There was a man in our apartment, Miner Chipman, who was very busily writing. He was an advertising man, but he wanted to write novels. I remember we used to discuss writing problems. He pretended to be a little irritated because he lived on the top floor and had a little writing room he had built there with a beautiful view. Once he said to me, "Look here, you're down in that little first story apartment and you get your stuff published. I have a view of the whole city and the editors won't take my manuscripts."

Interv: (Laughter) Were you writing at home at that time or mostly at the Book Club?

Lewis: I was writing mostly at the Book Club. But I would sometimes work at home in the mornings and sometimes on Saturday. We had an attractive roof garden on the apartment and I'd sometimes go up there on sunny days and get some air and sunshine.

Interv: Was Maynard Dixon painting there then? Did he have a studio in his home then?

Lewis: No. I think he had a studio in the Montgomery block.

Interv: And Dorothea Lange was actively photographing was she?

Lewis: I think so, that's my recollection. Maynard Dixon did a lot of magazine illustrations at that time, for the old Sunset magazine and other Western magazines.

Interv: What sort of man was he?

Lewis: He was sort of like the movie version of a cowpuncher. I think, in his early days, he had worked as a cowoby. I know that is what he specialized in in his magazine illustrations.

Interv: Was Colonel Wood a good conversationalist?

Lewis: Oh yes, he liked to talk.

Interv: Was he a tale-spinner? Was he that sort of person? Or do I just think so? I think of him as sitting around telling stories about the Indian Wars, and so forth.

Lewis: He may have. But if he was like that it isn't within my memory.

LITERARY PEOPLE AND LIFE OF SAN FRANCISCO

Interv: You were a member, or are perhaps still, of an organization known as PEN. Was that an important thing to you? Or was this just something quite incidental?

Lewis: It was never, I don't think, important to anybody except maybe to Charlie Dobie and Gertrude Atherton. They're the ones who kept it alive.

Interv: What was the point of it?

Lewis: It's a national organization. This was the San Francisco chapter. It was for writers to get together and discuss common interests, I suppose. It was a writers' social club. There is another organization called the Authors' League of America, which looks out, supposedly, for the economic welfare of writers, you might say. I think the PEN was just a sort of social supplement.

Interv: Did you belong to the Authors' League?

Lewis: No, I never did.

Interv: How did Charles Caldwell Dobie happen to be so active in it?

Lewis: I think he probably liked such organizations. He was the secretary, I remember, for a long time. Maybe that was just because he was good-natured.

Interv: What sort of person was he?

Lewis: He was a rather quiet, reserved individual, very nice but not an outgoing type. You couldn't picture him slapping anyone on the back and that sort of thing. He was rather formal. He took his writing very seriously. He was never one to talk slightingly of it, like so many professional people do. They say, "Oh I just dashed this off in a spare moment." He would never have said that.

Interv: He didn't start writing until he was fairly mature did he?

Lewis: I don't think so. He was a writer when I knew him. His chief work was for magazines although he did a number of novels. He did a book on San Francisco, and one on Chinatown.

Interv: He's pretty much forgotten now, I think.

Lewis: I think so. I don't think any of his books is still in print.

Interv: I recently happened across Blood Red Dawn and read it. It was a little hard going. And it was his first novel.

Lewis: Yes. One was called Next of Kin, I think.

Interv: Was that good? I have never read that.

Lewis: I don't think I ever read it either. I used to read his stories in the more literary magazines like Harper's or Scribner's. He used to sell stories to them.

Interv: On western subjects?

Lewis: I don't remember. They were probably laid in San Francisco. But what the themes were I've forgotten.

Interv: The reason I was asking what sort of person he was was that I was surprised that he was so sociable as to continue as secretary of the club for that many years.

Lewis: I think he liked these gatherings.

Gertrude Atherton was really the mainspring. She was a strong-minded old lady and if she wanted Dobie to be secretary of the club she would say to him, "Charlie, you're secretary." (Laughter) That was it.

Interv: Did you know Gertrude Atherton well?

Lewis: I knew her pretty well in her last years, yes. She lived not very far from here, down on Green near Fillmore.

Interv: That was with her daughter, wasn't it?

Lewis: Yes, Mrs. Russell, who died just a few months ago. She lived with her daughter and Mrs. Russell's son, George Russell. When his mother died George sold the old family home. It's been torn down and an apartment was put up there.

Interv: When did you first meet Gertrude Atherton?

Lewis: I guess it was in the early 1920's, although I'm not sure of that. It might have been then--I think I probably met her casually once or twice. But the PEN meetings were in the late '30's and early '40's. That's when it was most active. They'd meet maybe once a month at Mrs. Russell's house on Green Street.

Interv: I see. Was it just an informal meeting or did someone speak?

Lewis: No, there were never any speakers. It was sort of like a cocktail party, although it usually went on and on. Groups would gather--different groups in different parts of the ground floor--and have a series of little meetings. But that happens at all cocktail parties.

Interv: (Laughter) Did the organization here have most of the prominent writers of the city as members?

Lewis: I think so. They had a lot of members in Berkeley. I remember Mrs. Julia Altrocchi used to come over from Berkeley. Ben Lehman also used to come in the old days.

Interv: Was it interested in young writers?

Lewis: I think anyone who had published a book or two was put on the list and got an invitation. It was very informal. There were no dues as I remember, and you came or not.

Interv: Gertrude Atherton in her book My San Francisco described a dinner at Montalvo and said that you and Mrs. Lewis were there and a number of others. I think it was for a foreign dignitary. But it sounds as if it was a fascinating group and I wonder if you remember.

Lewis: I have no recollection. My wife might remember. I would say that I wasn't there. But I've said that before on other occasions and she would say, "Of course you were." (Laughter) She would tell me all the circumstances. So I wouldn't swear to it, but I don't recollect.

Interv: I've always been fascinated by those dinners at Montalvo. They sound, at least at this distance, fascinating.

Lewis: Of course, the Senator and Gertrude were close friends. Dobie was too. Dobie spent a lot of time down there.

Interv: What was Senator James Phelan like?

Lewis: I remember that physically he was a rather small chap with a neat, pointed beard. I don't know much about him really. He was, I think, rather on the quiet side, but a very gracious individual, polite and all. But I just didn't have enough contact with him to know much about him.

Interv: The list of guests at this dinner that Gertrude Atherton described included Templeton Crocker. You must have bumped into him somewhere.

Lewis: I think he used to come to the PEN meetings if I'm not mistaken.

Interv: Was he a member of the Book Club?

Lewis: Oh yes.

Interv: Do you know what started his interest in books?

Lewis: No. He was rather of an artistic temperament, though. Many of these wealthy families have some member who has no interest in the family business, and instead he goes in for collecting paintings or books. He was the artistic member of the Crocker family. Warren Howell would know about him. Warren and his father sold a lot of books to Templeton Crocker. I think Warren in turn has been selling some of the Crocker books.

Interv: Oh, I thought many of them went to the Historical Society.

Lewis: The California books did. But a lot of the other things-- English literature, manuscripts and such--I believe John Howell's shop has sold some of them.

Interv: Was he an intelligent collector?

Lewis: Of course if you're a wealthy man and want to form a library, you don't have to be particularly intelligent.

Lewis: You can get plenty of advice from dealers and such.

I think he more or less, like Henry Huntington, gave blanket orders to dealers. If something good came up in an auction, the dealer would probably go over the catalogue with Crocker and he'd say, "Buy this and this and that." So if you have expert advice and want to form a library, you don't have to have very much information.

Interv: And the books are more valuable if you don't read them.

Lewis: (Laughter) Oh yes. They should be in pristine condition.

Interv: Crocker was a great party-giver, wasn't he?

Lewis: I believe so. He had the upper two floors in an apartment building on Russian Hill, at the end of Green Street. I'm pretty sure I never was at one of his parties. I wasn't on his visiting list evidently. (Laughter)

Interv: Was he active in the California Historical Society at all, to your knowledge?

Lewis: I didn't know much about the Historical Society in those days. He was probably a life member, just as he was in the Book Club. But I don't think he--I know he had no active part in the Book Club, except to be a life member, though he probably bought all the books.

Interv: Another of the guests at this dinner where you may or

Interv: may not have been, was Joseph Henry Jackson, and Mrs. Jackson. I presume you were a friend of Joseph Henry Jackson.

Lewis: Yes, I knew him well for quite a long time.

Interv: Before he went to the Chronicle?

Lewis: The first time was when he was book editor of the Argonaut, the weekly magazine. He used to come around to the Book Club office. I'd occasionally review a book for him, if it was something that happened to do with book collecting, something within the field of the Book Club. Then later, after he went to the Chronicle, I occasionally used to review some book of Western Americana that he didn't have time to do himself. He was an extremely busy fellow. He not only had a daily column in the Chronicle, but he also did a long article each Sunday. He did quite a lot of reviewing, too, for the Herald Tribune in New York, for their book section. And he brought out at least one book a year. He also had a weekly radio program. He was a very prolific writer.

Interv: Yes, and a careful one.

Lewis: That's right, yes. He did some things that I could never do. That is, he would review the same book for

Lewis: the Sunday Chronicle, quite a long review, and then he would do a lengthy review for the Herald Tribune. And they would be quite different reviews. That always astonished me. (Laughter)

Interv: He was certainly important in forming the literary tastes in this area, wasn't he?

Lewis: He encouraged a lot of people to collect Western Americana. I don't think there's any doubt of that. And he certainly built up the Chronicle's book department until it was one of the important book review sections in the country. He used to make yearly trips to New York to keep his contacts back there.

Interv: Apparently he was very good at that, was he not?

Lewis: Yes, he was. I don't think he personally solicited advertising, but he saw to it that a lot of book advertising came out here. It had never been done before and it hasn't been done since. The Chronicle and other San Francisco book departments don't have anything like the amount of advertising they had in Joe Jackson's day.

Interv: Did he become interested in Western Americana about the same time that everyone else did? Or was he earlier?

Lewis: I'm not sure about that. He was doing book reviewing in San Francisco. Naturally he emphasized the books of

Lewis: regional interest. Besides, he must have had a natural interest in Californiana because nearly all his own books were on some phase of the West. He did one book about a trip he and his wife took to Guatemala. But aside from that I think all of his writings were on the West.

Interv: I remember his saying something to me about not being able to review--not feeling it was proper to review--books even though they were on local subjects that were only of limited interest or limited availability. Maybe this was in relation to Book Club books. He felt he couldn't really review them, only mention them in passing.

Lewis: That could be, and that's understandable. To review a book in a daily newspaper that is available only to a very limited number of people like a Book Club book, I think that's rather a waste of time. Besides, it might have the effect of irritating people who might want the book but find that the distribution was restricted. I don't doubt that Jackson realized that. He didn't emphasize books in limited editions. Of course he used to review our Westgate Press books. They were limited editions but they weren't restricted to the membership of any club.

Interv: What size issues were they? How many did you print?

Lewis: That varied. Our signed editions were limited to five hundred. Some of the other editions were even less than that. I remember my little book on Lafcadio Hearn was only three hundred fifty copies. And it took us several years to get rid of the three hundred fifty copies.

Interv: At this famous dinner, Stewart Edward White was also a guest. Wasn't he a kind of precursor of a lot of this Western writing, for instance, Dobie's novels? His may have been a creative leadership.

Lewis: It may be. I'll admit that if I ever read any Stewart Edward White book I've forgotten it. Although he lived in California, I don't think he wrote primarily about California. He wrote historical novels about the settlement of the West and things like that, is that what you mean?

Interv: There was a trilogy, I think, on California wasn't there?

Lewis: Yes, Gold, The Gray Dawn and The Rose Dawn. I believe one of them was a Gold Rush novel. His novels were mostly serialized in the Saturday Evening Post.

Interv: Did you meet him?

Lewis: No, I don't think I ever met him, although he lived down on the Peninsula somewhere.

Interv: We have on our outline the Roxburghe Club. Were you a member early?

Lewis: I was a member fairly early. But I wasn't one of the originating group.

Interv: Have you been particularly interested in it?

Lewis: I was for a while, in the beginning. Then for a time I didn't go very often. But in recent years I've been pretty regular. The Club has had a sort of rebirth you might say in recent years. They usually have interesting meetings. The Club meets once a month, except during the summer months.

Interv: When did you first belong to it?

Lewis: I think sometime in the early '30's. We used to meet at restaurants or clubs in different parts of town.

Interv: Did they have speakers then?

Lewis: Yes. We always had someone to give a talk and usually there was discussion afterwards.

Interv: What sort? Always bibliographical?

Lewis: Always having something to do with books. Sometimes the speaker was a visiting writer from the East Coast or England. Or it might be one of the members of the Club itself, telling about his collection. A very wide range of subjects.

Interv: Can you compare it with the Book Club in its sponsorship of interest in fine printing here, and books?

Lewis: It bears somewhat the same relationship that we talked about a little earlier--that of the Author's League and the PEN. The Roxburghe Club takes care of the social side of book collecting. That is, it gives people interested in books an opportunity to get together at dinner once a month and talk about their hobby. The Book Club doesn't do that. We used to sponsor lectures, but we haven't done that for a long time. The Book Club has a party two or three times a year, usually when a new book comes out. But that's the extent of our social activity.



At Clamper meeting, Murphy's, 1955, left to
right: Carl Wheat, Al Shumate, Oscar Lewis,
Edgar Jessop, Lee Stoppie

CLUBS, SOCIETIES AND LIBRARIES

Interv: Have you been a very interested member of the Bohemian Club?

Lewis: Yes, I've been interested but not as actively as I'd like to be. When something comes up that I'd like to do for the Club I usually have a manuscript on hand and a deadline to meet. So I sometimes feel like apologizing for doing so little. But I'm always thinking that next year I'll have a few weeks free so that I can do some writing for them.

Interv: Do they still have a so-called artists member classification?

Lewis: Yes. The Club has what are called professional members. They are either actors, amateur or professional, or artists or writers.

Interv: And you're in that category, are you?

Lewis: Yes, I'm a professional member.

Interv: You have been on the California Historical Society Publications Committee off and on for some years, have you not?

Lewis: That's right, yes.

Interv: When did you first become a member of the Society or that committee?

Lewis: Not too long ago, maybe ten years.

Interv: Have you used its collections very much?

Lewis: I go there frequently. I don't think I've written a book in a long time that I haven't gone at some time or other to consult some book that's not available elsewhere. Besides, it's a good source of picture material for illustrating books. In fact I'm planning to go there shortly because I'm getting together illustrations for my current book. So I'll be at the Historical Society several times during the next couple of weeks.

Interv: Have you any thoughts on its development in the years that you've been using it?

Lewis: The publication activity--the book publishing phase of the club--has been a sort of step-child for a long time. It was rather frustrating being on the Publication Committee because the Society directors insisted that publications support themselves. When there was no money in the publications fund, the Society could publish no books. Well, it seemed to me and some other members of

Lewis: the committee that this was wrong, that one of the chief functions of an historical society is to make available historical material. We sometimes nursed along manuscripts for several years, but there was never any money to publish them. Finally, the author would get tired and take the manuscript elsewhere.

Another thing that was rather frustrating was the Society's policy in regard to the series of guides it published several years ago. Mine on San Simeon was the first. Then George Stewart did an excellent guide to the Donner Lake and high Sierra country. The third was done by Will Robinson on Los Angeles. The San Simeon book happened to come out at a very fortunate time. The Castle had just been opened to the public. The Society had never published a book in an edition of more than a thousand. San Simeon sold forty thousand copies the first year. George Stewart's book sold ten thousand copies within a very short time. Yet there was a feeling within the Society that that was not the sort of publishing it should do. The three guide books were finally turned over to the Lane Publishing Company at Menlo Park, which has since handled their distribution. I think that's an odd sort of snobbishness on the part

Lewis: of the Society. They seem to be saying, "It's all right for us to publish books in limited editions, but we shouldn't bring out historical material in large editions for sale to the general public."

Interv: We were speaking of the Historical Society library and your use of it. What libraries do you use for the most part? You mentioned the Mechanics.

Lewis: Of course, the Bancroft. I haven't been over there on my book which is on Sutter's Fort, because Sutter has been so much written about that the material is all readily available. Besides, I've been collecting Californiana for years and have in my own collection pretty much of what I needed for this current job. One of the things that I have to consult in libraries is newspapers, and the San Francisco Public Library is a good place for that. They have a fine collection of bound volumes of the local papers and weekly magazines. So the Public Library, for that sort of thing, is as good as can be found around here.

Interv: Have you used the State Library?

Lewis: I used to use it quite often. I still go up there occasionally. It is useful to research workers primarily because of its newspaper index. The State Library is

Lewis: the only place where the newspapers are indexed--it isn't a complete index of course, but it is nearly complete since about 1900. Every day one of the staff goes through one of the papers and puts the references in the file.

Interv: You must have known Miss Caroline Wenzel.

Lewis: Oh very well indeed, yes.

Interv: A wonderful person to work with.

Lewis: She was a wonderful person. Her successor, Allan Ottley is doing a fine job. Have you ever done any work with him? He's very much interested in helping to dig out information.

Interv: Professor Hart suggested that you might have some recollections of the Bancroft Library from earlier years and its development, and earlier people in it.

Lewis: As I remember, it was on an upper floor of the main library when I first started going there. Now, of course, it's on the site of North Hall, the old brick building which was standing when I first came to Berkeley. I don't remember anything special. I think Priestly was head of the library at that time. Bolton had already come and gone. At least I don't remember ever having seen Bolton there.

Interv: I guess he then came back some time later, but not in that official capacity.

Do you remember Mr. Brizee? Did he ever chase down things for you?

Lewis: I remember him. Then there was Eleanor Bancroft. Wasn't she there for a long time?

Interv: Yes. She was certainly a devoted librarian, very helpful.

Lewis: She was like Caroline Wenzel up in Sacramento. They both knew exactly not only what the library had, but where to put their hands on it. Even with all the catalogues and such, you have to live with a library ten years or so before you really know your way around.

WRITING

Interv: We have come way up chronologically and now we want to go back to the subject of your writing. You must have been very self-disciplined to do so much of it during all this period, with the Book Club and so many other activities.

Lewis: Well as a matter of fact I didn't have many other activities. The Book Club didn't take much time. It was just that I had got into the habit of writing. I usually had some project on the way, so it was natural to go to the typewriter each morning and pick out a few hundred words. You don't have to be a facile writer--the main thing is to be a regular worker, I discovered. If you do only five hundred words a day and you do it steadily, you will certainly do a book a month--I mean, a book a year. (Laughter) But I've never felt I was doing a lot of writing, that is, a large volume of writing. I usually had some project on hand but I wasn't straining ahead to get it done at a certain time. I took my time. Many

Lewis: writers who have been writing fewer years than I have have turned out a lot more words than I have.

Interv: Have you always written for regular periods each day?

Lewis: Usually. Like anybody else with a job to do, I usually show up at about the same time each morning. I'm usually at work by half past eight or nine, and I write until twelve-thirty or so. Those are not sweat shop hours. Sometimes that's all I do. Once in a while I work an hour in the afternoon or maybe an hour or so at a library, or an hour reading in the afternoon. I think that's the way most writers work.

Interv: Did you edit a number of books before you wrote one all the way through, from beginning to end, of your own?

Lewis: My editing work was mainly because of my connection with the Book Club and the Grabhorn Press. The story used to be that when the Grabhorns were printing a book, especially if it was some item of Western Americana, they'd fold the sheets and make up a dummy. And if it looked a bit thin they'd say, "Here, it needs a little bulking out. Why don't you write an eight page introduction to go with it?" I don't know whether that actually happened, but I can think of no

Lewis: other reason why some of their books should have had introductions.

Interv: What was the first of the books that you wrote then?

Lewis: I think it was a little book for the Book Club, called The Origin of the Jumping Frog. That came about because Ed Grabhorn had come across a copy of a little paper published in Sonora, California in 1853 that had on its back page a one paragraph story about a jumping frog. We reproduced the story in facsimile and I did some research and found that the yarn had been printed several times in slightly different versions in other mining town papers. All this was of course some years before Mark Twain got hold of it and made it famous. It's a very slight book, less than fifty pages, as I recall.

Interv: "Hearn and his Biographers," did that precede this?

Lewis: No, that was later. I believe it was in the late '20's. Well you might be right, the Hearn was earlier than that. The Hearn was published in 1930 and the jumping frog in 1931.

Interv: Was that about the time you were working on the history of San Francisco for the Chicago publishing firm?

Lewis: Yes. That came out a year or two later, '32 or '33.

Lewis: It was probably not much earlier though.

Interv: Was there ever a specific time when you were first writing Western Americana? Or had you always just done some of that?

Lewis: I think when I started writing for young people's magazines at least half of what I wrote was non-fiction. I'm quite sure some of it was historical material on California. That was about the only thing I knew in those days. Not that I know very much more now.

Interv: Did you do a lot of reading of history when you were a young man?

Lewis: I did a lot of reading of everything. I think that by reading everything I got my hands on, by the law of averages, I must have read a lot of history. I always did like to read. I liked history, factual history, not so much historical novels. I never seemed to get interested in them.

Interv: What sort of Western history was there available?

Lewis: There were a lot of things that everybody read, like Two Years Before the Mast, Bayard Taylor's El Dorado, and so on.

Interv: They must have been exciting reading to a young man.

Lewis: I think they're still exciting reading to young people.

Interv: Was Royce much read then? Did you come across him?

Lewis: Yes, I read him quite early. You can read Royce not only for what he has to say, but for his manner. He was a stylist as well as an excellent historian. I very much admired his California from every standpoint-- its special pleading, its beautifully arranged logical argument, and his real sense of style. I think that book pretty well demolished the Fremont legend for many people. It came out in the middle '80's when Fremont was still a very big figure in the world.

Interv: What was the "History of San Francisco" project?

Lewis: It was a job that was offered me, a sort of ghost writing job. It was really a mug book. That is, the publisher, the Clarke Company, of Chicago, would send a team around to different cities, and they would get some prominent citizen to front as the author of a local history. The San Francisco book was three volumes. The first volume was the history, and the other two were biographies of prominent citizens. The only requirement was that you subscribe to the book. If you subscribed you were a prominent citizen. If you didn't subscribe you could be the mayor or what-

Lewis: ever, but you were left out. (Laughter) They got Lewis Byington who was an agreeable old chap who had been district attorney to serve as author. So ostensibly he was the author of the book, although he wrote none of it. I, who wrote it all, was listed assistant editor. But Byington contributed a forward in which he refers to it as my book, instead of his book. (Laughter) So he let the cat out of the bag. That job was done for a fixed fee--I believe it was \$1,500. But I tried to do a decent job, although I wasn't paid enough to justify spending very much time on it.

Interv: Did you have to write all the biographical data?

Lewis: Oh no, they had people who did that.

I used that episode in a chapter of a novel several years later, called The Uncertain Journey.

Interv: I wondered about that.

Lewis: The chap who was in charge of the local crew used to come down around the Book Club office, a very nice old fellow. He was a very tiny person, almost a midget and quite elderly. He told me many stories. The episode in the novel was mostly based on things he told me. He wanted me to go with him when they moved to the next city, at what would have been a pretty good salary

Lewis: in those days. I was to be his assistant. He'd had trouble finding the right people to write the histories. The biographies gave no trouble because they had regular printed forms for the subscribers to fill out. These gave the essentials and were sent back to Chicago where they had hack writers who took printed forms and wrote the biographies from them.

Interv: Was the job itself of getting a whole history of San Francisco together valuable to you in a general way?

Lewis: Well, I don't think it did any harm. I remember I was interested. It wasn't a boring job. And I did learn a lot about the town. Also, I assembled quite a collection of early San Francisco books at prices that were quite reasonable. When I look at the dealers' catalogues nowadays and see what they are listed at I congratulate myself on my good judgment.

For instance, Hittell's History of San Francisco, which you could find in practically any second-hand store in those days at around five dollars, now is quite rare and sells for around fifty dollars. I think I paid \$7.50 for my copy of The Annals of San

Lewis: Francisco. A number of other San Francisco books that were then common are now rarities and bring high prices.

Interv: You were talking last time about your books. One of them, an early one, which I believe you edited, was Frank Norris of the Wave. Was that a Westgate Press book?

Lewis: That's right, yes.

Interv: Was that because of any special interest of yours in Frank Norris and his writings?

Lewis: I think probably; I'd always been interested in Frank Norris. Somewhere I ran across a bound volume of a San Francisco weekly, "The Wave." I forget who owned it; it might have been Ed Grabhorn, who was always picking up such items. Anyhow, we got the idea of making a book of selections from the paper. Norris had something in almost every number for several years during the middle and late 1890's. Some of it had been already gathered and republished in Norris' collected works. But a great deal of material had never been republished. So we decided to go ahead. I collected about twenty stories and articles and wrote an introduction, and we had a book.

Interv: Did the Norris family have to be involved?

Lewis: Yes, I got in touch with Charles Norris. He was very much interested.

Interv: He was always very proud of his brother, wasn't he?

Lewis: Yes, very much so. He once said that Frank was really the writer of the family and he just tagged along, although he wrote probably three times as much as his older brother did. But of course he lived twice as long.

Interv: He was probably right though, wasn't he, in his appraisal of their work?

Lewis: Yes. Frank's novels I think will be remembered for a long time, whereas Charles is pretty well forgotten already. I don't think many people nowadays read Salt or Seed or others of his one-word titled novels. It was a writing family. Kathleen, Charles' wife, is a very prolific writer; or used to be.

Interv: We were talking about Hearn and his Biographers. Do you remember how many copies of that were published?

Lewis: I think only about three hundred fifty. The book stirred up considerable controversy in the East. There were several long letters in the New York Times. The Times published a long review and Hearn was very much in the news for several weeks.

Interv: People who like Hearn feel very strongly about him, don't they?

Lewis: That's right. They were either very loyal friends or just the opposite.

Interv: What stirred up the controversy? What did people take exception to?

Lewis: Well, there was a Dr. George Gould who had befriended Hearn before he went to Japan. Hearn thought that Gould had taken advantage of him, as he did with most of his friends sooner or later. He eventually fell out with all of his American friends. He had left his library with Gould, supposedly as security for a loan. Hearn, as I remember, later claimed that he had paid the loan and asked Gould to ship his library to him to Japan. But he never heard from the man. There were several of Hearn's letters in reference to the library that I quoted in the book. Gould had died shortly before the book was published, but a friend of his wrote the Times Book Review objecting to certain references the reviewer had made to Gould and the library. And that brought an answer from another of Hearn's friends defending the review. I have somewhere a collection of these various letters. They

Lewis: stirred up quite a controversy. And of course we could have sold more than our three hundred fifty copies of the book even though it was quite expensive--fifteen dollars. I remember that the man writing in defense of Dr. Gould kept referring to "That fifteen dollar pamphlet." (Laughter) There's nothing like a good row to stir up interest in a book. I sometimes wish I could have started a similar row about some of my other books.

Interv: Did The Big Four stir up a row?

Lewis: No, not particularly. I don't remember that The Big Four did. There was a slight tempest in a teapot when my novel I Remember Christine came out.

Interv: Oh really! Someone thought they saw a familiar subject or person in it?

Lewis: I'll tell you how it happened. One of the characters was named Casebolt, a history professor. I used the name Casebolt because I liked the sound of it, and because it was a familiar name in the family. My father had done considerable business with a San Francisco mill owner named Henry Casebolt. He was the man who built many of the cable cars. My father rented part of his factory when Casebolt went out of business and

Lewis: made it into a planing mill. The factory was down on Laguna Street, near Union. That's why I named my college professor Casebolt.

Knopf thought he had the novel sold as a serial in the Atlantic Monthly. But the Atlantic was then more or less loaded up with serials and it would mean holding up the publication of the book for something like two years. Knopf advised against it. So the Atlantic instead used just one chapter, the first chapter, which has to do with Casebolt. They published it under the title "Portrait of a Professor."

When the thing was in proof it was read by somebody in the Atlantic office who had been a student of Herbert Eugene Bolton's at Berkeley. This student--ex-student--thought that some people might think that my Casebolt was a caricature of Herbert Bolton. One day I got a telegram from Edward Weeks asking if Casebolt was purely an imaginary character or if it was based on somebody.

Interv: Edward Weeks was then editor?

Lewis: Yes, he still is.

I wired back that the character was purely imaginary, and explained why I had used the name Casebolt. Next I got a letter from the Atlantic's

Lewis: attorney asking a long list of questions: Did Casebolt ever teach at the University of California? Did Bolton ever run for Lieutenant Governor? There were a number of questions of that sort. I answered them all and thought I had surely convinced them that the similarity of names was just a coincidence. Yet when the magazine came out a month or two later the name Casebolt had been changed to Casement. (Laughter) The Atlantic was still playing safe.

Interv: But Knopf in the book let it stand.

Lewis: Yes. He was not involved in all that. I'm not sure he ever knew anything about it.

Interv: I can't imagine Dr. Bolton or anyone in his family caring to sue over it. (Laughter)

Lewis: Naturally not. Even if he did think he might have been caricatured, he would hardly have admitted it. My Casebolt was not a very admirable character. I'm sure Bolton felt that the matter didn't concern him at all.

It's a curious thing, just lately when John Caughey edited an anthology of California writing he reprinted this chapter from the Atlantic. He added a little note stating that my Casebolt seems to

Lewis: be a composite of a number of professors of California history.

Interv: You had not known Dr. Bolton?

Lewis: I had known him very slightly. I never took any of his classes. But I'd read some of his books or skimmed through them. They are excellent examples of scholarship, but I did find them a little tough going.

Interv: I read The Big Four when I was at Stanford. I often wondered if anyone in the Stanford family--there weren't many of them and I suppose they weren't very loyal to the memory of Senator Stanford--objected.

Lewis: No. I don't know who said this, but it's true that one can forgive an awful lot of an ancestor who leaves you ten million dollars.

I occasionally hear from history students at Stanford who were assigned to write a review of The Big Four. So they certainly don't try to suppress it down there.

Interv: Professor Franklin Walker, when he was speaking to me about our interview, mentioned that you must have done some of your research at Stanford. But as I remember there isn't much there on him.

Lewis: I was down there but I don't remember finding anything

Lewis: in particular. Nathan Van Patten was the librarian then. He was helpful, but they had very little.

Interv: Where did you do most of your work for it?

Lewis: I did a lot at the Bancroft and at the San Francisco Public Library, in the newspaper room there. The newspaper room was a terrible place in those days, a small, dark place entirely without air. If you stayed for an hour you had to go out and get some air before you went back. Since the new librarian has taken over, they've moved the newspapers to a well-lighted room on an upper floor. In the old days you actually went through the files. Most of the papers are on microfilm now.

Interv: I still feel tired in the shoulders when I think about it.

Lewis: On the other hand, I liked turning the pages better than looking at microfilm. I find it hard on the eyes.

Interv: I think that we read somewhere that The Big Four started as a novel.

Lewis: That's right, yes. I'd written a lot of short fiction. If you write fiction, sooner or later you come on something that won't fit into a short story. I had the theme for a novel pretty well worked out. I wanted

Lewis: to show that the progress from rags to riches and vice versa was speeded up here in California in the early days. A generation or two ago a man who had been a day laborer could become a multimillionaire, whereas men of education and background might come out here and end up sweeping out a bar or something like that.

In preparation for my novel I started reading what I could find out about the families that lived on Nob Hill, the Crockers and Floods and Stanfords and Hopkins. I got so interested in the railroad big four that I decided to write a group biography about them. About that time Alfred Knopf came out on one of his trips to the Coast. He had seen some of my work in magazines, and he called me and I told him about my book idea. He encouraged me, so when I had the manuscript finished I sent it back to him. The novel I had intended to write never got written. The nearest to it was I Remember Christine, which is a quite different novel than the one I originally planned.

Interv: Did I read somewhere that it was the novel of yours, or the piece of writing of yours that you like best?

- Lewis: There are parts of it that I still enjoy reading. I can't say that about much of my other writing, so it must be my favorite.
- Interv: The Big Four, then, was the first nationally published of your books, wasn't it?
- Lewis: That's right. My first few books were all published out here.
- Interv: In the Byington volume, I believe, it says that you were, at the time that was published, working on something called "The Grim Four." Was that its original title?
- Lewis: Yes. That was my working title. I called it "The Grim Four." I don't remember whether I was still holding on to that title when it was finished. But somewhere along the way we dropped the "grim."
- Interv: Then Knopf continued to publish you for many years, didn't he?
- Lewis: He published six others, seven books in all. The first one came out in '38 and the last in the early 1950's.
- Interv: Those were the years of Knopf's most active publishing, weren't they?
- Lewis: Those were the times he himself kept in close touch with most of his authors. In many respects it was still

Lewis: almost a one man organization.

Book Publishers and the West

Interv: This is skipping ahead a little: Someone said that you had been Knopf's representative out here for a time.

Lewis: Yes. I was officially his West Coast editor. But what I was really was a sort of book scout. Once or twice a year I'd go up to Portland and Seattle or down to Los Angeles. Someone out here would send in a manuscript to New York or a description of some project he was working on--or Alfred would hear about something that sounded promising--and he'd ask me to look up the writer and get as much information as I could.

So on my trips I'd sometimes stop in Eugene, Oregon, on my way to Portland. Or I'd go on South to San Diego or Riverside.

Interv: Was that interesting to do?

Lewis: Yes, I enjoyed it. But it was a frustrating job because after you had nursed along a novel or a non-fiction book for maybe as long as a year--read the

Lewis: manuscript and so on--when it was finished and sent back East almost invariably it was rejected and returned with a polite letter. That's the trouble with writers who live out here. Here in the West we're under a handicap in that in almost every case the final decisions are made in New York. As I once told Alfred, Madison Avenue is not the best possible place from which to decide what Californians want to read, or to keep in touch with work being done out here that might interest readers all over the country. I think that's still true. Nowadays all the publishers try to cultivate their West Coast market because they know a lot of good writing is done here and a lot of books sold. But you just can't do that by sending out an editor once or twice a year who spends two days in San Francisco and two in Los Angeles and maybe a day in Seattle and then goes back to the home office. What these trips usually amount to is that the editors invite the writers already on their list to lunch, and they have a nice chat and that's about all. I doubt if they have any success at unearthing any new writing talent.

Interv: All of the major publishers have tried to keep people here as representatives, haven't they?

Lewis: Most of them do. When Doubleday tried it a few years ago, they started in a big way with an elaborate office and quite a big staff. But somehow it didn't work out. Now they have a modest office with one man, Luther Nichols, who is a good man, in charge. But Doubleday is still the only major trade publisher that has a West Coast office that I know of. Some have salesmen who might be called part-time editors. They not only sell books but keep an eye open for likely manuscripts. It's one of the handicaps Western writers have to put up with. Most of the decisions are made in New York, with maybe a few in Chicago or Boston.

Our only Western publishers of any consequence are places like the Lane Publishing Company--specialized publishers out here of any great importance.

Interv: The University of California Press is the nearest.

Lewis: That's the nearest, yes. But it's a university press.

Interv: They published one of your books or more?

Lewis: Just one, a biography of the early day scientist, George Davidson. That was what you might call a sponsored book. I believe someone left a fund for the preparation of his biography and I was given the job.

Interv: This brings up a question. Someone quotes in some book

Interv: from what I believe is a manuscript called A History of the Bank of California, of yours.

Lewis: It wasn't a manuscript. It was published as a pamphlet. I believe it was to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the bank. So, they brought out a brief history of the bank. James J. Hunter was president at the time. I have a copy here.

Interv: Oh, I see, it was done in the Newcomen Society series. This was after Bonanza Inn, which I suppose gave you a good deal of material?

Lewis: It could have, yes.

Interv: Bonanza Inn was with Carroll Hall, was it not?

Lewis: That's right, yes.

Interv: How did that develop?

Lewis: Well, Carroll and I were old friends, and he was also interested in local history. He very much enjoyed digging out material from the newspaper files, and he was very good at locating pertinent material. As I remember, we talked about doing a book on Hearst's first years as a newspaper owner--the early Examiner and so on. We never did write that. We somehow got sidetracked and did the research and I wrote the text. But that wasn't always so. I also did some gathering of material and he

Lewis: wrote some of the text.

Interv: Did he do the research for you for anything else?

Lewis: No, just Bonanza Inn--and the Examiner book that never got written. I think I still have a basketful of his Examiner notes. I asked him recently why we never went ahead with that project. His memory was that at about that time several biographies of Hearst had come out. And we thought we'd better let our book rest a while. Mr. Hearst had been overdone. Carroll was then working in a bookstore here in town--Roy [Vernon] Sowers', remember Roy Sowers?

Interv: Oh yes.

Lewis: He still has a shop down in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I think it's purely a mail order business that he does now.

Interv: Did Bonanza Inn stay in print?

Lewis: It's still in print, yes. It still sells a few hundred copies a year. Whenever it goes out Knopf prints another couple of thousand.

Interv: Do you have any idea how many copies of The Big Four have been printed?

Lewis: No, I believe it's in its seventeenth printing now. That's the last I heard.

Interv: About what size editions do they print?

Lewis: Not very big now. I think maybe two thousand or twenty-five hundred, something like that.

Interv: Is that your book that has had the largest sale?

Lewis: No, the book that's had the largest sale is a young people's book on Hawaii that Random House published. It's in the Landmark Series that sells well all over the country. I understand many of them go into high school libraries.

Interv: Did you spend a long time in Hawaii?

Lewis: I spent about a month there. At the time, the publisher also wanted me to do another book on Guam, Okinawa and the islands around it, as the most remote and least known areas of the United States. But after I got to Hawaii I asked myself why should I go another three thousand miles to write another thirty thousand word young people's book, so I turned it down. That was a mistake. At the time I had no idea how the Hawaii book was going to sell. A few years later, after I discovered that it was selling around five or six thousand copies a year, I wrote and said I changed my mind about Guam, and that if they were still interested I would be

Lewis: glad to go out and write it. I got a not very cordial letter saying that they had decided not to do a book on Guam after all. (Laughter)

Interv: I suppose there isn't really the intense interest in Guam as there is in Hawaii.

Lewis: At that time it was not long after the war. Of course, Guam and Okinawa had been much in the news. But there still is need for a book on Guam. It's just a small island, but a lot of interesting things have happened there, not only during the war, but earlier. But Random House didn't want it in their Landmark Series.

Interv: Have you done others in that series?

Lewis: No.

Interv: What proportion of your books are initiated by you and what by publishers?

Lewis: In recent years most of them have been initiated by publishers. That's true of my current book on Sutter's Fort. I was asked to do it by Stewart Holbrook who was editing a series on historic American forts. Most of my recent writings have been what you might call commissioned books.

Interv: I suppose you have a large proportion of requests to do books that you must turn down. Have you had a selection problem?

Lewis: Yes. I have in recent years because I've been trying to taper off. There are one or two things I've been promising myself to do. So unless it's something I'm particularly interested in, I'd rather turn it down.

Interv: The Sutter's Fort book is in a series edited by Stewart Holbrook, is that it?

Lewis: Yes. He was the general editor, but he died soon after the series started. Eight titles have been announced so far. But if the first eight go over, I have no doubt there will be others.

Interv: Do you have other novels that you want to do?

Lewis: I have one in mind that I'd rather like to write, but I don't think I'll ever get around to it.

Interv: The two novels that we know of are The Uncertain Journey and The Lost Years. Both of those were done with more enjoyment than not?

Lewis: Oh yes, I enjoyed them both. Fiction is a good change of pace. I think the ideal way would be to write a novel and then maybe two non-fiction books. It's a relief not to have to check the authenticity of every statement you make. When you write a novel you don't have to put footnotes telling where you got each bit of information.

Interv: The Uncertain Journey--I think you said that the Clarke Publishing Company appeared in it. Were other things in it from your immediate experience?

Lewis: I'll have to think.

Interv: It was set in a later period than you were in Berkeley.

Lewis: Yes. It wasn't, I think, autobiographical, not in the usual sense. Novelists write about things they know, but they alter it to fit the story. I doubt if anything is purely imaginary. Everything is based on knowledge of some sort, either something you've learned first-hand or something you've read.

Interv: Sagebrush Casinos--did you lose your shirt while doing research for it? (Laughter)

Lewis: No, but I had a good time doing the research. But my gambling experience never went much beyond the ten cents slot machines. I've been told too much about the house percentages.

Interv: Was that a book that came as a result of the suggestion of a publisher?

Lewis: No, I think it came about because once I went up to Nevada with Howard Cady who came out here as Doubleday's editor. He's the one who opened the office originally. It was more or less a vacation trip and we took in

Lewis: Virginia City and of course Reno. I think on that trip we talked about a possible book on gambling. That was the first book I did for Doubleday. Also, on that trip, I think it was, we got over to the little town of Austin in central Nevada. A little mining town paper, the Reese River Reveille, was still being published there, although by then the town had only about fifty people. There was a complete file of the paper there, going back to Civil War times. I went back later and spent several weeks going through the Reveille files. It was mostly from excerpts from the paper that I compiled The Town That Died Laughing.

I was going to do the book for Doubleday, but by the time it was finished Cady had left Doubleday and become editor for a Boston house, Little, Brown and Company. So it was published by Little, Brown.

Interv: I always thought it was hard to switch publishers.

Lewis: No. It's only hard to switch publishers when your publisher is reluctant to let you go. In most cases I didn't have too much trouble. (Laughter)

Interv: Bay Window Bohemia must have been an idea initiated by you, since you knew so much of the background.

Lewis: I think it probably was, although I just don't remember.

Interv: Where did the material for that come from--it was so varied? Partly from your own hearing of stories?

Lewis: Probably most of it was from people I'd talked to and stories I had collected from reading.

Interv: Did you gather the material up over a long period?

Lewis: I probably did, not knowing that I was gathering material for future use. All writers do that. I would remember certain things I hadn't used in the books I was currently working on, I suppose that was it. But it's awfully hard to reconstruct such things after ten or fifteen years.

Interv: I think the jacket suggests that you knew some of the people. We were trying to figure out which ones you could have.

Lewis: I'm sure I didn't know Mark Twain or Bret Harte. (Laughter) I knew George Sterling. I used to see him quite often. Of the others, I don't know. Gertrude Atherton, I guess she appeared in it, although I've forgotten. I remember talking with her about it. I think she gave me some stories, most of which I later found she'd already used in her own autobiography.

Interv: The Gelett Burgess group had left San Francisco by the time you came, hadn't they?

Lewis: That's right. There were one or two still around. Porter Garnett was still here. And I had some correspondence--because of my work with the Book Club--with Gelett Burgess when we published one of his short stories. It was in a series called "Literary Pamphlets" in the keepsakes series. I believe I corresponded with Will Irwin, too, although nothing came of that. I don't think we ever reprinted anything of his.

Interv: Are there other books that we haven't discussed that you found particularly interesting to write?

Lewis: There's one I always remember because I still get occasional echoes of it, and that is a book on California houses called Here Lived the Californians. Rinehart published it. The reason I remember it is because every once in a while, although the book's long been out of print, the publishers forward me letters from readers. And almost invariably they write to tell me that I don't know one house from another. (Laughter) That stems from the fact that the publisher switched the captions beneath pictures of two of the best known houses in California. One of them I remember was the Huntington house at San Marino, the one that's now the

Lewis: art gallery. The other was a well known house on the San Francisco Peninsula. Of course I heard about the error as soon as the book was published. I telegraphed the publishers, and they wrote back very apologetically and said that they were just going into a reprinting and of course the mistake would be corrected. Well, when I saw the second printing, I found that the captions were still under the wrong pictures. (Laughter) And that continued as long as the book remained in print, which fortunately wasn't long. But people still write and tell me I don't know one house from another. (Laughter) Authors sometimes get blamed for things that are not their fault.

BOOK REVIEWING

Interv: As a reviewer have you ever had book reviews changed?

Lewis: Not that I know of, no, I don't remember any. About the only thing I've noticed happen to my reviews is that, because of space limitations, the editors will sometimes drop out a paragraph. It's not always the last paragraph. Sometimes it's in the middle, and that usually leaves a glaring gap. The reader wonders why the reviewer stopped in the middle of something he was saying and went on to something else. But that's understandable because of make-up problems, especially in newspapers and weekly magazines.

Interv: Have you enjoyed doing book reviews? I know you've done a great many.

Lewis: Yes. One reason I like to do book reviews is because you read books you ordinarily would have missed. Sometimes you're in for pleasant surprises. And the books I review are usually more or less in my field: that is, California history and biography, or fiction. So I'm

Lewis: usually glad to get the books and glad to do the reviews.

Interv: Do you have trouble, in this very small world, in reviewing books by friends?

Lewis: Once or twice I have sent a book back and asked the editor to get someone else to review it. That's because the book was by a friend and I didn't want to give it an adverse review. I've only done that two or three times. I don't doubt some of my friends have done the same thing with my books.

Interv: In New York I suppose the attitude is a little different--writing book reviews is a kind of reciprocal compliment in some cases.

Lewis: I don't doubt that. It happens. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.

Interv: Did you start out doing book reviews fairly early in your career?

Lewis: Not very. I think my first book reviews were for Joe Jackson, both for the Argonaut and later for the Chronicle. Most of my other reviews were for the Herald Tribune, though once in a while I've done one for the Saturday Review, and on occasion for the New York Times, but not very often. Maybe I had had

Lewis: luck, but in one case it seemed to me that one of the New York papers was trying to influence my review, so I said to hell with it.

Interv: Did Mr. Jackson ever do that with you?

Lewis: No, no. If it was something he thought I was interested in, he'd send the book over and say, "Give me twelve hundred words on this by Wednesday if you can." And that was all. There were never any strings attached.

SAN FRANCISCO ART COMMISSION

Interv: This is in quite a different vein, but we have down here that you were a member of the San Francisco Art Commission. You must be one of the few writers who have been on the Art Commission, are you not?

Lewis: Yes, but according to the charter, one member of the Commission must be a literary man, plus one artist, two architects, and one sculptor. I succeeded Gertrude Atherton. She was the literary member for a long time. When she resigned I served for about ten years. Dr. Albert Shumate is now the literary member.

Interv: Did you find it an interesting experience? It was from 1944-1954?

Lewis: I was appointed for three four-year terms and I quit just before the final year.

Interv: How did you happen to quit?

Lewis: I got a little dissatisfied, let's say, with certain things that were going on. There was a controversy

Lewis: over murals for the new Hall of Justice, and the artist, John Garth, who had been engaged to do the job, was publicly criticized at an Art Commission meeting by a member of the art committee. Garth was called incompetent. It wasn't a matter of good or bad art that caused the row, but a matter of good or bad manners. After the meeting, one faction agreed that somebody ought to do something about it. I suggested that the commission call a meeting and publicly apologize to the artist, but nothing came of that. I was so disgusted that I finally sent in my resignation to Mayor Christopher. He was very nice about it. He said if I'd withdraw my resignation and come back he'd back me up. By then the matter had got into the newspapers. But I told him that I'd already served for eleven years and to appoint somebody else.

Interv: Were there things that got done during that period that you were particularly interested in?

Lewis: It was a pretty routine, cut and dried thing. The Art Commission did what it was expected to do. There was very little initiative shown. I was supposedly head of the literary committee. There was nothing the literary committee had to do except occasionally

Lewis: to pass on the wording of inscriptions on plaques in public places or on public buildings. Such matters came up maybe once or twice a year. The architects had to pass on the design of public buildings and on signs that protruded over the sidewalks, etc. They had plenty to do. The music committee conducts the pops concerts, and the art committee puts on the annual outdoor art shows. It was all pretty much the same thing year after year. So, it was not a particularly exciting group to belong to. I think it must be more lively now because they have a couple of maverick members. At any rate, the Art Commission gets into the newspapers quite often now. In the old days they just went through the paces, doing what they were told to do.

THE WRITER IN THE WEST

Interv: What were the changes in conditions or climate or whatever in writing in the West from the time you started as a writer to the post World War II period?

Lewis: I think when I started the writer in the West had an easier time than writers today.

Interv: The writer in the West particularly?

Lewis: Well, yes. But it was easier all over the country, mostly due to the fact that there were so many more magazines in those days. It was comparatively easy to break in because both magazines and newspapers used so much more original material than they do today.

For instance, I don't think anybody could support himself writing boys' stories today. There just aren't enough magazines.

Interv: I suppose not. I wondered if there was any tendency on the part of the New York publishers to think there couldn't be anybody in Berkeley who knew how to write,

Interv: or anywhere in California.

Lewis: I don't think it was ever quite that bad. But publishers in the East are not always qualified to judge what people out here want to read.

Interv: But they were willing to give you the benefit of the doubt as much in that period as they are today?

Lewis: I think so far as book publication is concerned the West has always been at a disadvantage. The only nationally circulated literary magazine that we ever had out here was the old Overland Monthly, and that didn't last very long. With all the important magazines and all the publishers on the far side of the continent, authors out here are at a disadvantage. That's indicated by the fact that for years whenever a writer began to make a reputation, he just automatically gravitated to the East Coast--men like Twain and Harte, and a lot of others.

Interv: How did it happen that you chose to stay here?

Lewis: I suppose, largely because there was no overwhelming demand for me to come back East.

Interv: I suppose writing on western subjects would put you in a little different position.

Lewis: Perhaps that's it. Besides, I never had any desire

Lewis: to live in the East. If it was a handicap to write from the West I was willing to make that sacrifice and stay out here.

Interv: Overriding the considerations of fewer markets today in magazines and perhaps fewer books being published, I don't know, would a young man starting to write in California now be on a more equal basis with a young man starting to write in Boston or New York than he would have been early in the century?

Lewis: Yes, he finds it easier now. This might sound as though I'm denying what I said earlier, but earlier I was thinking primarily of magazine writing and of the beginning writer. Authors don't begin by writing books. They begin, at least they did in the old days, by writing for newspapers and magazines. But I think today the publisher in the East is more conscious of the Western market, and that implies also that he's interested in selling his books out here. So he's more interested in getting books on Western subjects.

Interv: Has there been any material change in interest in California history--popular books on California history--that you've seen?

Lewis: The general interest, I think, is growing all the

Lewis: time. The market for Western books is bigger today than it has ever been.

Interv: There was an implication earlier, when you were speaking about the Westgate Press, that in the '20's there was a kind of surge in the market for some sort of Western Americana, or was it just fine press books?

Lewis: I think we were talking about limited editions which were very popular in the late 1920's. You seldom see them any more. Thirty years ago you rarely saw a book by a first-rate author that didn't have a special edition of five hundred copies or so. Knopf was one publisher who did that all the time--for Willa Cather, Thomas Mann, William Hudson, the Green Mansions man, and others. He would bring out a special limited edition, at a higher price, in advance of the regular one.

Interv: So on the whole the national interest in Western subject matter has just grown apace, is that right, year by year?

Lewis: That's true. Of course a lot of it is due to the population growth. Today there are a great many more people to buy Western books.

Interv: I remember during the 1949-50 period there was a great surge in California centennial material published, that later was remaindered.

Lewis: What happened out here in '49 and '50 is the same thing that happened on a national level in the early '60's during the centennial of the Civil War. In '49 and '50 there was a wide interest in the Gold Rush and in statehood, but so many books came out that they flooded the market. The same thing happened with Civil War books. The good ones sold very well. Those that came out later, a lot of them, got on the remainder tables very fast.

Interv: They were good bargains. I bought some.

Lewis: Yes, so did I. Some of them were excellent.

Interv: Is there anything more you would like to have included in this general discussion?

Lewis: I can't think of anything unless you can. I warned you at the beginning that it wasn't going to be any rich vein you were mining.

Interv: A very interesting one. We're awfully grateful to you.

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